

Sexuality, eroticism and female character identity in *Desengaño quinto*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to demonstrate sexuality as part of individual identity in female characters of María de Zayas' work, *Desengaño quinto* (1637 - 47). I discern four questions: what is eroticism? What was its function in 17th century Spain? How does the female author represent it through various symbols? And why is representation of female sexual identity in literature so important given the historical context?

Keywords: Gender violence, Inequality, Mozambican cinema, Protest.

Sexualidad, erotismo e identidad de los personajes femeninos en el *Desengaño quinto*

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo demostrar la sexualidad como parte de la identidad individual en los personajes femeninos en la obra de María de Zayas, *Desengaño quinto* (1637 - 47). Distingo cuatro preguntas: ¿qué es erotismo?, ¿cuál fue su función en España en el siglo XVII?, ¿cómo representa la autora el erotismo a través de varios símbolos?, ¿por qué es tan importante la representación de la identidad sexual femenina en la literatura considerando el contexto histórico?

Palabras claves: Sexualidad, Identidad femenina, Siglo de oro, España del siglo XVII.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Mike Featherstone, Octavio Paz (1996, p. 7), “when we speak of love and eroticism, we cannot but be aware of their association with the absent third term, sexuality. Paz, the Mexican poet and Nobel Prize winner, argues that sexuality is clearly the primordial source with eroticism and love the derivative forms”. In simple terms, sexuality is sexual activity and eroticism is the excitement. Thus, María de Zayas uses love and eroticism to give her female characters sexual identity in *Desengaño quinto*. Sexual desire and its expression via sexual activity form an important part of the female identity (with eroticism and love the derivative forms).

EROTICISIM IN 17th CENTURY SPAIN

España y su civilización, declares María de Zayas as the first feminist known in Spain (p. 76). Thus, it is clear why María de Zayas dares to represent eroticism in her *Desengaño quinto*. However, she does this not directly, but in a very subtle way, not to hurt the honor sentiments within the male dominated Spanish society. The feminist eroticism that she portrays is something unique in 17th century Spain, also known as the Golden Age. In *Embracing Our Eroticism: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Women's Eroticism*, Nicole Van Ness clearly states, “The subject of women's sexuality has a rich and convoluted history. Literature focusing specifically on women's eroticism and pleasure has been limited and fraught with ambivalence” (p. 1). Therefore, analyzing María de Zayas' *Desengaño quinto* as a representation of women's eroticism grants it an extraordinary place in literature.

MARITAL MISERY

From the beginning of *Desengaño quinto*, Doña Inés is so concerned about her and her husband's honor. She knows being unfaithful in the marriage will lead to the loss of her husband's honor which also means Inés losing her honor and life: “es lo cierto ser

esto la causa por donde ellas, aborrecidas, se empeñan en bajezas, con que ellos pierden el honor y ellas la vida” (p. 380). The wife will lose her life because, as per the honor code of the 17th century, man takes revenge by blood on an unfaithful wife.

Ines’ deepest sexual desires are satisfied in the very first year of her marriage: “Quiéranlas, acarícienlas y denlas lo que les falta, y no la guarden ni celen, que ellas se guardarán y celarán, cuando no sea de virtud, de obligación” (p. 380). However, later she is no longer taken care of by her husband and is obligated to satisfy her desires on her own, “que ellas se guardarán y celarán, cuando no sea de virtud, de obligación” (p. 380). Thus, Inés is not only vulnerable to fantasize seduction but also autoeroticism, stimulating herself. Doña Inés is no longer satisfied with her sexual life one year after marriage:

De manera que antes de dos meses se halló, por salir de un cautiverio, puesta en otro martirio; si bien, con la dulzura de las caricias de su esposo, que hasta en eso, a los principios, no hay quien se la gane a los hombres antes se dan tan buena maña, que tengo para mí que las gastan todas al primero año, y después, como se hallan salidos del caudal del agasajo, hacen morir a puras necesidades de él a sus esposas, y quizá, y sin quizá, es lo cierto ser esto la causa por donde ellas, aborrecidas, se empeñan en bajezas con que ellos pierden el honor y ellas la vida. (p. 380).

“Caudal del agasajo”, “flow of entertainment”, is a metaphor for sexual pleasure, which disappears a year after her marriage. There are critics who agree with the analysis that Doña Inés is not sexually satisfied and therefore vulnerable to fantasize. David Castillo offers the following:

Applying this logic to Doña Inés’ entranced visits to don Diego’s bed, Whitenack argues that even if it is obvious that the married lady is “to be regarded as a victim of diabolical magic” (p. 175), one of the lessons of *La inocencia castigada* is precisely that a wife

deprived of sexual attentions (“lo que ha menester”) might be “vulnerable to seduction” (p. 112).

Doña Inés is free in the house and is not confined to do household chores: “Gozaba la bella dama una vida gustosa y descansada” (p. 380). “Descansada” here means Doña Inés does not have to do any household chores as she has “criadas”. However, she still doesn’t have that same freedom outside the house as her husband accompanies her everywhere. At the same time, there exist women who are unmarried and have more freedom than her:

Solo amaba a su marido, y con este descuido, ni se escondía, si estaba en el balcón, ni dejaba de asistir a las músicas y demás finezas de don Diego, pareciéndole iban dirigidos a una de dos damas, que vivían más abajo de su casa, doncellas y hermosas, mas con libertad. (p. 381).

Interesting is the fact that both unmarried and married women engage in erotic sexual relations, resisting marital confinement on one hand and rejection by men on the other hand. The “dama” is clearly rejected by don Diego but does not give up and uses her sexuality as agency over the rich don Diego. She not only lies to him by promising to help him get to Doña Inés but also gets an hermosa woman of “oscura vida” to have sex with him disguised as Inés. Sexuality, thus, is a symbol of power used by women to take revenge on men after being rejected: “Al principio negó don Diego su amor . . . ” (p. 384).

EROTICISM REPRESENTED THROUGH VARIOUS SYMBOLS

Inés is attracted to don Diego, and her sexual desires awaken. She expresses her eroticism from the beginning by fantasizing about don Diego:

Alabó doña Inés, y su esposo, el romance porque como no entendía que era ella la causa de las bien cantadas y lloradas penas de don Diego, no sentía agraviada; que, a imaginarlo, es de creer que no lo consintiera. (p. 383).

Therefore, Doña Inés feels that nothing is wrong in daydreaming about don Diego because it doesn't form part of the external reality where consent is required. Imagining don Diego internally helps her satisfy the eroticism. Her body which expresses sexual desire through imagination/fantasy is later able to live that externally. Fantasy affects one both internally and externally: "Fantasy disturbs us both on a physical and psychological level. But fantasy is also the notion of the body in its virtuality and at the same time in its physical reality" (Choiniere, 2006, p. 37). Her fantasies representing her internal eroticism establish a connection with the external eroticism which is carried out later through the candle by involving in sexual relations with don Diego. It is true that Doña Inés is tempted by the magician's candle to get involved in sexual relations with don Diego, but this is done by the author to grant reality to Doña Inés imaginations and fantasies.

However, at the same time Doña Inés demonstrates her concern with protecting the conjugal honor creating this paradox. Could it be true that María de Zayas creates this discrepancy in Doña Inés' identity to mystify the reader of 17th century Spain and avoid censure? If Doña Inés is openly sexual and not worried about protecting her husband's honor, this work would not be accepted by society. So, the author creates a balance of identity in which Doña Inés is worried about honor, and at same time has sexual fantasies outside of marriage.

The dress, "el vestido", generally used to cover a woman's body and protect her honor by stopping her from adultery, is used in the novel just to expose her body. This takes place by female characters removing "el vestido" and engaging in sexual activity. A dress should be costly as it protects honor. However, the woman who lures Diego, requests Inés not to give a costly dress, as she is going to take it off anyway, and

become involved in sexuality later. This means not giving any significance to honor by wearing a costly dress. On the other hand, Doña Inés' wrinkled dress symbolizes the eroticism with which she engaged in sexuality herself: "Doña Inés era afable, y como la conoció por la vecina de calle, le respondió que aquel vestido estaba ya ajado de traerle continuo, que otro mejor le daría" (p. 385). Thus, wrinkled dress is testimony and evidence of her wild sexual experiences. Women share this experience of erotic sexuality when they decide to share the wrinkled dress: "Thus, in cultures of honor, men often feel justified engaging in aggression to control their romantic partners (or female family members), and women are encouraged to endure such treatment for the sake of honor" (Carvalho, 2018, p. 540). The irony of "el vestido" is that it undoes the honor, that it protects usually by covering a woman's body.

Light and darkness are used to help convey the theme of reality and fantasy within the domain of sexuality. The motif of candlelight serves as a transition to reality from fantasy, in which Inés' fantasies become reality. Hence, the candle becomes a symbol of sexual reality. As soon as the candle lights, her sexual fantasies with don Diego become reality, and she indulges in sex with him. Whatever happens while the candle is lit is not a nightmare, but reality and Inés is conscious of what is happening: "los malignos sueños que ella creía ser, lo que no era sino la pura verdad" (p. 397). Thus, the candle functions as a transition from darkness to light, fantasy to reality:

. . . que como la vela empezó a arder, la descuidada doña Inés, que estaba ya acostada, y su casa y gente recogida, porque su marido aún no había vuelto de Sevilla, por haberse recrecido a sus cobranzas algunos pleitos, privada con la fuerza del encanto y de la vela que ardía de su juicio, y en fin, forzada de algún espíritu diabólico que gobernaba aquello, se levantó de su cama, y poniéndose unos zapatos que tenía junto a ella, y un faldellín que estaba con sus vestidos sobre un taburete, tomó la llave que tenía debajo de su cabecera, y saliendo fuera, abrió la puerta de su cuarto, y

juntándola en saliendo, y mal torciendo la llave, se salió a la calle, y fue en casa de don Diego, que aunque ella no sabía quién la guiaba, la supo llevar . . . (p. 394).

Ines appears in a skirt every time she meets don Diego, giving her easy access to satisfy her sexual desires.

Ines' routine is described as she constantly starts visiting don Diego: "despertó despavorida y levantándose, fue a buscar el faldellín, que no hallándole, por haber las criadas llevado los vestidos para limpiarlos, así, en camisa como estaba, se salió a la calle, y yendo encaminada a la casa de don Diego" (p. 397). As she establishes a routine to visit don Diego, her sexual freedom shifts to increased sexual freedom and she goes to don Diego without a skirt while it is being washed of the impurities from the previous night.

Finally, darkness blinds Inés from reality. Inés' blindness (darkness) is a metaphor of erotic fantasies (just like she does in the start with don Diego). As a blind woman she cannot see the reality outside but can fantasize freely about what she wants. Likewise, that house where she was always confined, sexually unsatisfied, is now the house where she is free to carry out her sexual desires and fantasies without any hindrance:

A doña Inés pusieron, ya sana y restituida en su hermosura, aunque ciega en un convento con dos criadas que cuidan de su regalo, sustentándose de la gruesa hacienda de su hermano y marido, donde hoy vive haciendo vida de una santa, afirmandome quien la vio cuando la sacaron de la pared, y después, que es de las más hermosas . . . (p. 408).

Similarly, blindness which allows her to indulge in erotic fantasies becomes a form of resistance to the confinement, domestication, and captivity she suffers from the beginning.

On the contrary, María de Zayas creates a paradox where the title of the novel is a metaphor of sexuality punished: "Inocencia" here "innocence" of expressing sexual desire, being punished for having a sexual identity. On the other hand, names of other female characters involved are never revealed, thus emphasizing only their sexual identity which is their name. Similarly, Inés means "chaste", abstaining from extramarital affairs, and this creates parallelism with the honor code. However, at the same time Inés expressing her sexual desire simply to mystify the readers of her actual identity is done to avoid censure, offense and maybe dishonor.

SEXUALITY BUILDS SOLIDARITY AMONG WOMEN

The author also uses eroticism as a space for women of all classes to homosocialize, thus eliminating class differences prevalent during that era. Not only this, but women of different social classes living on the same street, lodging symbolizes harmony and solidarity among them: "Pues, andando como digo una mujer que vivía en la misma calle, en un aposento enfrente de la casa de la dama, algo más abajo" (p. 384).

The woman encounters, lures don Diego, and finally goes to several other women for help. The first is a prostitute, the second one the maid, and finally she meets Inés, all of these women representing different social classes:

Pues ido don Diego, muy contenta la mala mujer, se fue en casa de unas mujeres de oscura vida que ella conocía, y escogiendo entre ellas una, la más hermosa, y que así en el cuerpo y garbo pareciese a doña Inés . . . (p. 384).

The woman asks the maid to call Doña Inés, representing the common interest they share, despite class differences: "pasó en casa de doña Inés, y diciendo a las criadas dijiesen a su señora que una vecina de enfrente la quería hablar, que, sabido por doña Inés la mandó entrar" (p. 384). Inés, on the other hand, doesn't think twice about it and

agrees immediately to give the dress representing solidarity in sexual identity among women and not caring about class: "Doña Inés era afable, y como la conoció por vecina de la calle, le respondió que aquel vestido estaba ya ajado de traerle continuo, que otro mejor le daría" (p. 385).

"No, mi señora – dijo la engañosa mujer -; este basta, que no quiero que sea demasadamente costoso, que parecerá (lo que es) que no es suyo, y los pobres también tenemos reputación" (p. 385). Inés asks the criadas to bring another dress and gives the one she is wearing to the lady. Finally, the chain given from Diego to the lady transfers to Inés, symbolizing interdependence, bond, solidarity among women and overturn of the male dominance: "dejando en prendas la cadena, que doña Inés tomó, por quedar segura, pues apenas conocía a la que le llevaba, que fue con él más contenta que si llevara un tesoro" (p. 385).

This process also allows the author to portray the future of the country she wants, in which women of different social classes live in proximity to satisfy their sexual needs. We also see harmony among women of different social classes who share their sexual desires via the "vestido", dress. Doña Inés giving her dress to the "dama" symbolizes transfer of sexual identity to women of different social classes having the same sexual desires. Also, this is the author's way of responding to novels of the Golden Age that portray dependence of the lower classes on the wealthy and women not having sexual freedom. *El médico de su honra* is one such example that deals with masculine honor. Husband Gutierre's honor is restored by killing his wife who is suspected by him of being unfaithful. The wife is innocent. Thus, Calderon's concept of honor deals with the male domination and honor within a marriage. María de Zayas resists this concept in her *Desengaño quinto*.

Finally, solidarity of women and their interaction with each other also serves the function of refusing class differences and honor codes prevalent in 17th century Spain.

OBJECTIFICATION TO CREATE PARADOX

The candle not only acts as a symbol of sexual reality but also objectifies Inés. The irony is that it objectifies the already objectified image of Inés: "Porque, pasados los tres días, vino y le trajo una imagen de la misma figura y rostro de doña Inés, que por sus artes la había copiado al natural, como si la tuviera presente" (p. 393). On the other hand, we also see sexual objectification of Inés by the nude image:

La figura de doña Inés estaba desnuda, y las manos puestas sobre el corazón, que tenía descubierto, clavado por él un alfiler grande, dorado, a modo de saeta, porque en lugar de la cabeza tenía una forma de plumas del mismo metal, y parecía que la dama quería sacarle con las manos, que tenía encaminadas a él. (p. 393).

Finally, the moor tells him when he lights the candle Inés will arrive.

Another paradox the author creates is by continuously demonstrating how worried Inés is about protecting her honor, but at the same time fantasizing about Diego, which later becomes sexual reality while she is conscious. We as readers acknowledge the risk of portraying the candle only as a sexual reality for Inés in the 17th century. Thus, the author creates a paradox by using the candle as a symbol for the objectification of Inés, while at the same time representing her sexual reality.

CONCLUSION

Paraphrasing Kristie Bulleit Niermier's words from "Duelling, Honor and Sensibility in eighteenth century Spanish Sentimental Comedies", honor has different types in that era (p. 4). Honor conflicts are mostly resolved by the king or royal figure. Spain seems to be obsessed with honor in the Golden Age. Honor seems to be important in hierarchical differences. It is important for all: the poor, village class, married men, and seduced, raped women. As stated in *España y su civilización*, "the honor is not lost when revenge is taken by blood" (Uguarte, 1998, p. 73). Thus, lost honor is restored by death of the

alleged culprit in the Golden Age. Similarly, we can look at Lope de Vega's views on honor: "Los casos de la honra son mejores, porque mueven con fuerza a toda gente" (2007, p.18). Finally, Pedro Calderón de la Barca has similar views about honor: "En los dramas de Calderón, esposos, padres y hermanos matan para defender su honor. El honor no se pierde cuando la ofensa es vengada con sangre" (Uguarte, 1998, p. 73). María de Zayas belongs to the same era but clearly rejects all the honor norms and beliefs mentioned above. In her *Desengaño quinto*, even if concern about honor exists, husband or brother do not kill to restore honor. Not only this, María de Zayas refuses male authors' established norms about honor in their works. Again, in a very subtle way the author gives female characters sexual identity to establish agency over men.

In 17th century Spain, a man's honor is restored only after killing his unfaithful wife, which in the 21st century is called "honor killing". Phyllis Chesler states, "There are very few studies of honor killing, however, as the motivation for such killings is cleansing alleged dishonor and the families do not wish to bring further attention to their shame, so do not cooperate with researchers" (2009, p. 62). María de Zayas not only declines 17th century Spain's concept but also the 21st century's concept of "honor killing" by not punishing the unfaithful woman but the patriarch husband and brother along with the sister-in-law who accepts the norms of patriarchy.

María de Zayas also uses eroticism as a tool to eliminate class differences in which women from all different social classes socialize to indulge in eroticism.

Finally, there is evolution and progress at the end of *Desengaño quinto*, as Inés survives even after indulging in extramarital sex with Diego, and the husband is not able to restore his lost honor by killing Inés. It is a triumph for Inés but not the husband. Similarly, the sister-in-law who accepts patriarchy is also hanged to death. All this hints towards the evolution of the country in which women who exercise sexual freedom triumph, and anti-feminist husband, brother and sister-in-law are punished.

WHY EROTICISM?

The author uses sexuality and eroticism as a tool to give women agency and power over men. María de Zayas, thus, even though she presents Doña Inés being punished, it is not the end she wants. She wants Inés to survive, thus representing the future of the country she wants where women's roles, sexualities, and femininity are reconstructed, giving them agency over men. Maria de Zayas gives her female character increased sexual freedom, demonstrations of agency and independence.

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