

2017

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María de Zayas and the Art of Breaking Free

Erin Cygan

FYI-102-27

From Spain to Istanbul: Piracy and Exile in the Early Modern Mediterranean

Jennifer Heacock-Renaud

Winter 2016/2017

Short Analytical Essay

María de Zayas's *Her Lover's Slave* is the first tale in her collection titled *Tales of Disillusion* from the year 1647. The protagonist of this tale, Isabel Fajardo, narrates the story of her own dishonor and her quest throughout the Mediterranean to regain it. At a soirée hosted by her slave owner Lisis, where both women and men are present, women are invited to share their personal stories of abuse and victimization at the hands of men. While sharing her story, Isabel identifies herself as a slave to the love of her rapist, Don Manuel. She physically embodies this slavery by assuming the role of a Moorish slave, a drastic change from her identity as a Christian noblewoman. I argue that Isabel's tale, along with those of the other women, provides an outlet for the author to explore the ramifications of the early modern honor code. More specifically, I find that Zayas utilized her own status as a noblewoman to expose the sequestered, oppressed lives of women and provide insight into silenced female voices. In other words, the author brings private experiences of women to the public forefront in her writing. In *Her Lover's Slave*, we see this in the transformation of the protagonist Isabel into a Moorish slave woman. In my interpretation of the text, Isabel's transformation, which symbolizes the oppression of patriarchal society, gives her newfound autonomy and mobility to challenge prescribed gender roles. These changes serve as a didactic mechanism for Zayas to critique the treatment and position of women in early modern Spain.

Zayas transforms Isabel into a Moorish slave woman as a metaphor for the character's status as a rape victim and this change in identity functions to deconstruct the honor code. The challenge to societal norms that this transformation poses demonstrates that women are not simply slaves to the domestic sphere and to their chastity. Deborah Compte, in her article "The Mora as Agent of Power", addresses Isabel's transformation and asserts, "Ironically, this appropriation of not only a false, but denigrated, identity affords her the means to redress the

wrongs inflicted upon her both personally and socially” (Compte 54). Essentially, Isabel’s identity as the Moorish slave Zelima grants her the necessary mobility to claim agency over her own life. Compte’s assertion is warranted as Isabel’s transformation demonstrates the repercussions of Manuel’s actions on her mind and soul. Socially, Isabel’s reputation is sullied. In early modern Spain, rape victims were ostracized by failure to fulfill their obligation to protect their virginity and public reputation. Isabel, in assuming a marginalized identity, limits the jurisdiction of the honor code. It is imperative for Isabel to assume the denigrated identity of a Moorish slave. Descending the social class ladder and feigning a different religious identity and ethnicity empowers her because she is subject to different expectations as a slave. For example, Isabel can traverse the city streets without male accompaniment. Additionally, she acquires control over her own body as exhibited by her conscious decision to place a brand upon her face: “[...] I decided to do something truly lovely, or rather an act even more senseless than my others, and as soon as I thought it, I put it into action. And the idea was, using a false brand on my face, to dress up as a Moorish slave, naming myself Zelima [...]” (Zayas 254). As a noblewoman, Isabel is unable to do these things and her new identity reveals what women are capable of when not isolated in the private sphere.

While setting aside her aristocratic origins allows Isabel to move freely and exhibit dominion over her own life to a certain extent, we have to pause; does she completely abandon her status as a noblewoman? Compte argues that Isabel successfully passes as Zelima and that this new self offers her previously unattainable authority (56). For instance, she claims that “[...] by repudiating her identity as a Christian noblewoman and by transforming herself into a slave, Isabel/Zelima effectively erases herself as Isabel” (56). I agree that the new identity Isabel crafts opens a space in which she can dictate her own life and assert agency. As evidence of this, one

might consider the episode of Zelima and the Moorish corsairs. In an assertive manner that enables her companions to follow her plan, Isabel constructs a story about her identity as Zelima and convinces the Moorish captain of the usefulness of her companions with the high ransom price they can fetch as Christians (Zayas 260). She even comes to domineer the men in her surroundings, such as in her interactions with Luis when she urges him not to kill Manuel (Zayas 256). Her new identity has created a previously nonexistent self-confidence. However, Compte's conclusion that Isabel "repudiates" her original identity is inaccurate in that it fails to consider how Isabel's actions throughout her adventure rely on her identity as a Christian noblewoman. While Isabel does abandon certain attributes of her nobility, she does not entirely forsake this identity. In the opening line of *Her Lover's Slave*, Isabel reasserts her high status for her fictional audience with the statement, "My name is doña Isabel Fajardo, not Zelima; nor am I Moorish, but Christian, daughter of Catholic parents who are among the most prominent citizens of Murcia" (Zayas 227). Here, it is clear that Isabel is adamant about her social privilege. She has traversed the Mediterranean and spent time in Algiers and now that she has returned to Spain and wishes to reintegrate, she needs to cleanse herself of any traces of the Muslim Other. In my interpretation of the text, if Isabel had completely forsaken her identity as a noble, her journey to regain her honor would not have been possible. For example, Isabel, on two separate occasions, is only able to convince her family's former servant, Octavio, to sell her into slavery for the sake of her quest by providing money, wealth associated with her Christian nobility.

Isabel's transformation from Christian noblewoman into Moorish slave, while shocking, induces intrigue, even for fictional audiences. Isabel's initial appearance as a branded Moorish slave, an exotic and sexualized identity, distances her from the male and female Christian audience at the soirée, yet this separation also generates allure (Compte 55). While I concede that

there is a division between Isabel and her listeners with underlying tones of sexual appeal, the Isabel-audience dynamic is more intricate. This intricacy manifests in the audience's reaction to Isabel's tale and her decision to join the convent at the end of *Her Lover's Slave*. The audience is utterly moved by Isabel's narrative and declaration to take spiritual vows, even going so far as to embrace her and offer support (Zayas 267). Despite the fact Isabel willingly disguised herself as an individual of lower social class, the audience within the story accepts her. One would think it difficult for a woman in Isabel's situation to fully reintegrate into Christian society. Individuals returning to Spain from Algiers or lands associated with the Moorish Other were subjected to close scrutiny and regarded with suspicion, as it was believed that time spent in the land of the Other allowed Moorish ideologies to seep into the psyche. Yet, the accommodating reaction of the *soirée* attendees runs contrary to expectations. On that note, Compte explains that, "As author of her own story of servitude and ultimate release, [Isabel] assumes an authority among the listeners [...]" (55). The audience's sympathetic response to Isabel's poignant tale can be attributed to the tale's focus on the injustices of her rapist. To the fictional audience, the wrongdoings of Don Manuel excuse Isabel's actions, which diverge from societal norms and expectations. The audience's warm acceptance of Isabel represents a partial reintegration into society, as they are willing to look beyond her transgressive acts and see a woman who has suffered at the hands of patriarchy.

Zayas, in addressing *her* audience, directs didactic messages to her female readers that encourage women to acknowledge the strength in forming bonds of solidarity. On this point, Compte proclaims that Isabel is capable of "assuming a personal authenticity that inspires others" (59). Essentially, Isabel's quest to salvage her honor and in the process obtain autonomy as a woman in a masculine world can serve as inspiration. Zayas is able to inspire and encourage

her women readers with Isabel's example. Within the text, the ability to have an effect on other women is seen in Isabel's interactions with Lisis. For instance, after Lisis discovers Isabel's noble Catholic identity, she essentially throws herself at Isabel's feet asking for forgiveness for violating her "valor and worth" (Zayas 267). Later, at the end of the *Tales of Disillusion*, Lisis, emboldened by Isabel's story, decides to break free from the bonds of male society and pursue her own path by joining the convent with Isabel. I understand this relationship as an instance in which Zayas attempts to inspire those outside of the text. By creating solidarity among strong women who reject their oppression in myriad ways and exhibit freedom of choice, Zayas sends an encouraging message to readers of her time and beyond. In essence, by finding empowerment through expressions of solidarity, women can successfully overcome adversity and rise to accomplish greater feats than those assigned by male authority.

Isabel's transformation is important because it shows that women were not always passive victims to men despite that the expected behavior of women was to appear submissive and accept without complaint the actions of men. Zayas argues that women cannot be objectified for men's pleasure outside the bonds of marriage. More importantly, Zayas affirms that women are more complex and capable than male hegemony construes. We see this exemplification of the abilities of women with Isabel's capacity to cross borders. Isabel crosses boundaries based on geography, class, religion, and ethnicity with her transformation into Zelima. Isabel's mobility stands as testament to the opportunities women can achieve when not constrained and the influence and knowledge they can exert when they subvert social convention. Women can successfully assume many roles in their daily lives, yet a male-dominated society that operated on rigid gender roles and an oppressive honor code during this time period neglected to

recognize the potential of women and instead subjected them to passivity and unfair expectations.

Overall, Zayas's decision to transform her protagonist into a Moorish slave is a mechanism that she uses to elucidate the mental and physical suffering of women due to the injustices committed by men within the system of the honor code. *Her Lover's Slave*, along with the other tales in Zayas's collection, enables the author to critique rigid Spanish society in a seemingly fictitious and entertaining manner. Underlying the surface of the text, the didactic nature manifests as Zayas provides a voice for noble women of the time and highlights their unseen struggles and triumphs. Without question, her themes and messages are still relevant today. Zayas's social commentary can be used to analyze and understand gender roles in a modern society that still caters to the authority of men, albeit with nuanced differences. Women today, just like Isabel, persevere and employ methods to circumvent patriarchal dominion and assert themselves as resilient, independent individuals who are capable of dictating their own lives and refusing the chains of male hegemony.

Works Cited

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