



Minnesota State University, Mankato  
**Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly  
and Creative Works for Minnesota  
State University, Mankato**

---

All Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other  
Capstone Projects

Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other  
Capstone Projects

---

2011

**The Life of Spanish Noblewomen in the Secular World and Their  
One Alternative: The Role of the Convent in María de Zayas'  
Desengaños amorosos**

Maria Middleton  
*Minnesota State University - Mankato*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds>

Digital part of the [Spanish Literature Commons](#)  
Commons

---

Network  
**Recommended Citation**

Middleton, M. (2011). The Life of Spanish Noblewomen in the Secular World and Their One Alternative: The Role of the Convent in María de Zayas' Desengaños amorosos [Master's thesis, Minnesota State University, Mankato]. Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds/250/>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other Capstone Projects at Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

The Life of Spanish Noblewomen in the Secular World and Their One Alternative:

The Role of the Convent in María de Zayas' *Desengaños amorosos*

By

Maria Middleton

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

In

Spanish

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

December, 2011

The Life of Spanish Noblewomen in the Secular World and Their One Alternative:

The Role of the Convent in María de Zayas' *Desengaños amorosos*

Maria Middleton

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

Dr. Kimberly Contag, Advisor

Dr. Gregory Taylor

Dr. Patricia Hoffman

## ABSTRACT

The Life of Spanish Noblewomen in the Secular World and Their One Alternative:

The Role of the Convent in María de Zayas' *Desengaños amorosos*

By María Middleton

Master of Science in Spanish

Minnesota State University Mankato, 2011

This thesis examines the literary works of María de Zayas y Sotomayor called the *Desengaños amorosos* (1647) and the message these works suggest about life choices for women in sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain. In these novellas, María de Zayas makes a connection to the actual life of noblewomen both in the convent and outside of it. Her writing suggests through virtual and narrated experience that life in the convent allows for greater self actualization than life as a married woman. For the female characters in *Desengaños amorosos*, María de Zayas often utilized the convent as the superior alternative to a life controlled and frequently destroyed by men in a patriarchal society that promoted a strict honor code.

This thesis investigates fictional women's lives as described in the novellas and the relationship to what type of lives these women could have in the convent in order to provide an explanation as to why Zayas constantly reinforced the choice of convent life for both *damaged* women as well as *undamaged* women in her exemplary texts. Outside of life in the convent, a respectable woman of noble blood had one option, marriage. The majority of Spanish noblewomen were brought up under the tutelage of the male head of the household until he chose a suitable husband for her who assumed responsibility for his wife after the marriage. The code of honor specified that women were fragile, weak minded, and they needed to be "protected" by a male guardian to shelter them from potential danger to the most precious treasure, the family's

honor. While the convent also served to protect and maintain a woman's honor, convent life was also an option that allowed women to assert a level of autonomy or self-actualization through the supportive female community and educational opportunities available to them in the safe, religious environment.

Zayas preference for narrative evidence of why women need to be self actualized is a means to an end. The constant theme of women who needed to learn to be aware of deception and illusion for self defense throughout the *Desengaños amorosos* indicates that for Zayas, noblewomen should choose the convent when faced with the potential of a bad marriage. Life in the convent served not only to maintain societal standards for women but also provide them an opportunity to learn and develop an understanding for the weapons necessary to defend themselves in a male dominated society. These weapons were words which provided them with a voice that could counter an entire code for behavior that devalued their intellectual ability and underestimated a woman's importance in maintaining a healthy society.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	13
Chapter One: The Life of a Secular Noblewoman in the Spanish Golden Age.....	16
Chapter Two: Life in the Convent as an Alternative to the Secular Life for Noblewomen.....	41
Chapter Three: The Convent as a Means to Meet Social Expectations while Promoting Women’s Independence.....	63
Conclusion.....	84
Works Cited.....	89

## Introduction

The purpose of this research is to examine the role of the convent as the superior alternative and source of refuge for women in the works of Zayas. The study uses a comparison with the historical lives of women within and outside of the convent during the Golden Age in Spain (1550-1670) to explain why Zayas promotes convent life over marriage for female contemporaries. This study focuses on a *novella ejemplar* called *Desengaños amorosos* by María de Zayas y Sotomayor (1647). It is first necessary to define the *novella ejemplar* of this time period. As a *novella ejemplar*, the purpose of *Desengaños amorosos* was to serve as an example for the readers. With this in mind, the basis of this thesis takes its shape. María de Zayas seeks to *Desengañar*, or disenchant, her readers to the hazards of love through the examples set by her characters. Many of the female characters in the short novellas included in the book are similar in two specific ways. The first is that each falls victim to the negative influence or actions of a male who has power over her life. The second is that the outcome for each woman leads to the loss of her honor and she must enter the convent and presumably spend the rest of her days closed off from the outside world. Zayas portrays each as a “happy ending” in which the woman is able to meet the societal virtues of purity and saintliness through living a life devoted to God. This indicates that, of the few respectable paths that women of the time could take, Zayas clearly supports that of the convent as opposed to married life.

Respectable noblewomen of during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were born with very few options. From birth, the female lived under the control of the male figure in her life. Women were expected to live under the power of the male head of household until he chose a suitable spouse. At that point control was transferred to her husband (Deformeaux 148).

Evidence of the patriarchal and male-dominated society that existed during the Golden Age in Spain is clearly portrayed in these novellas called *Desengaños*. Under male control, her female characters undergo severe character transformations. They are starved, made homeless, and almost murdered, all due to some male figure in her life. Doña Isabel of *Esclava de su amante* disguises herself as a slave in an effort to regain her honor by following her lover who robbed her of it. Doña Inés of *La Inocencia Castigada* goes blind through the punishment of being locked up for six years by her brother, husband, and sister-in law after she is deceived into adultery through the curse of an admirer. Doña Florentina of *Estragos que causa el vicio* barely escapes a violent death after her married lover kills everyone in her household in a jealous rage. Doña Lisis of the frame story, who is hostess of the *sarao* or the festivities at which each of the stories are being told, became deathly ill in response to the unfaithful actions of her supposed suitor. At the end of each tragedy, including the frame story of Doña Lisis, each of the women enters the convent to spend the rest of their days protected by the walls of the religious institution.

In the loss of their honor as noblewomen, their social value as women was also lost. With the loss of their most valuable treasure, their virginity, they essentially lost their lives as well as Pedro Voltes and María Buxo explain in their book *Mujeres en la historia de España*: “El honor viene a ser tan cotizado como la vida misma. Los estudios del tema indican que aquí se ha producido una extensión de toda la sociedad de los criterios y valoraciones nacidos en la clase nobiliaria” (77). Not only did they lose the status they held as respectable noblewomen but their own dishonor extended to that of the family and to society as a whole as well. That said, the convent was truly the only socially acceptable option for these women. Through the protection of



the convent walls, they could regain societal respect through spiritual service to the divine spouse, God.

Entering the convent for women in these types of situations served as a means of regaining societal respect but also meant personal security. During the Spanish Golden Age, ideology found in the various cultural productions (i.e. literary and theatrical pieces) indicates that many purported that women did not possess the moral willpower and intellectual capability to survive on their own. It was the belief that God appointed men to be held responsible for the actions and behavior of women (Sánchez Lora 51). They needed protection from their own weaknesses. Since the “protection” so essential to women as believed by society was only available in the convent or through a male protector, this meant the convent was the best option both socially and personally for these women, since the men in their lives failed to offer the necessary security.

Realistically, however, the noblewomen of the *Desengaños Amorosos* had no other option after the experiences that threatened their identity as honorable women. Zayas supports and promotes the life of women in the convent for women whose honor was held in question but also those whose honor remained undamaged. The character of Doña Lisis, for example, demonstrates her endorsement for life in the convent since Doña Lisis still had her honor intact and was able to follow the life expected of all noblewomen, that of marriage. However, after hearing the tragedies of each *Desengaños*, she decides on the alternative to marriage and enters the convent. These fictional examples of choosing convent life over a first or second marriage are the motivation for my study of the option of convent life for women in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Spain. It is of importance to note that historical research of the actual life

of noblewomen outside the convent, from childhood until marriage, provides the groundwork for understanding the significance of choosing convent life. This research examines the lifestyle secular noblewomen led and the how it relates to the horrific tales of tragic love that Zayas weaves in *Desengaños amorosos*.

The comparison of the convent lifestyle to its alternative, that of noblewomen who lived as a marriageable or married woman, is significant since convent life is not explored with any frequency in Spanish literary works by Spanish authors of the Golden Age. While Zayas does not describe in depth the lifestyle her characters led in the convent, her writing suggests that it was place where they could meet the societal standards and expectations of women and devote their lives to God and defend themselves from the harsh life they would most likely encounter in the outside world as illustrated in her novellas. To investigate the gap as well as the connection between the two lifestyles allows us the opportunity to gain understanding for her constant use of this ending in her *Desengaños* as well as to gain understanding of the purpose of convent life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Spain. I also examine whether or not the style of life in the convent corresponds with other prevailing themes in her writing since motivation to choose convent life is also pertinent in terms of rejecting marriage as an option. I will analyze pertinent textual evidence such as female companionship, divine love, and female autonomy gained through education that serve as support for her character's move to the convent.

Existing research on the work of María de Zayas is commonly focused on the female characters and roles and less on her characters' choice of convent life over marriage. As one of the primary female writers of the time period, the role of the women in her novels and their choice for convent life cannot be ignored. Focus of prior studies has included the role of honor

for women in “Challenging the Code: Honor in María De Zayas” found in the book *Dynamics of Discourse* which argues that, despite Zayas’ theme of defending women, she still ultimately adheres to the strict honor code of Spanish society (Williamson 139). Crisis and disorder is another theme found in *Dynamics of Discourse* in “Crisis and Disorder in the World of María De Zayas Y Sotomayor” which asserts the religious life as a means to deal with the crisis of Spain during the Golden Age (Perry 25). While these studies by Williamson and Perry review the cultural ambiance in which Zayas wrote and set her stories, they do not investigate the positive energy of the women’s choice to seek convent life over marriage and therefore there is need for further investigation.

In “Zayas as Writer: Hell Hath No Fury” the use of female narrators is examined as a means to promote the constant theme of the defense of women found in Zayas’ writing (Paun de Garcia 42). Additionally, “Estrategias temáticas y narrativas en María de Zayas: Las prácticas de la femineidad” by Pilar Alcalde also examines the specific narrators and their functions, the treatment of the female body, and the use of the convent to contribute further to her defense of women. Yet while additionally examining the defense of women as in this study, Alcalde’s work focuses on various themes and their relation to the defense of women rather than an in-depth focus on the convent. In “The symbolic order and María de Zayas's *Desengaños amorosos*”, Sara Noelle Colburne-Alsop investigates a psychological standpoint by making a comparison between the psychoanalytical theory of Julia Kristeva and the writing of María de Zayas. She argues that Zayas was hoping for a woman to take a step forward in the symbolic order of society and assert themselves as individuals by making the choice to reject marriage. While also acknowledging the convent as an alternative to marriage, it does not look into the social function and historical reality of the convent during the age in order to support and analyze this idea as I will in this

study. Another study that examines societal order is “María de Zayas’s Wounded Women: A Semiotics of Violence” by Yvonne Jehenson and Marcia L. Welles, published in the book *Gender, Identity, and representation in Spain’s Golden Age*. This research examines the *Desengaños amorosos* in relation to “contemporary symbolic orders of class, race, and religion” (178) and focuses on the relationships of violence and gender identity. Again, though examining similar themes which I will also address in this study, it does not closely compare the life in the convent with that of a married woman.

Research most definitely does not ignore the common thread of the convent as an alternative space for women. Research on this idea has examined the literary function of the convent as an alternative ending to the more commonly used “marriage plot” for female characters as demonstrated in *Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz* by Stephanie Merrim. Researchers have also compared the use of the convent in literature by a male author such as Cervantes and a female author such as Zayas in *Innocents Punished: The Narrative Models of María de Zayas* (Friedman, web). Comparisons have also been made with Ana Caro, another notable Spanish woman writer in Mercedes Maroto Camino’s article titled “María de Zayas and Ana Caro: The Space of Women’s Solidarity in the Spanish Golden Age.” Camino compares the author’s focus on personal relationships between females and their role in each writer’s work. These works have helped to inform this study on the elements of convent life in various literary contexts and their relation to the literature of María de Zayas.

In addition to literary criticism, historians have also done significant research into the time period itself, the life of women and the daily trials both within and outside of the convent. For example, Angela Muñoz Fernández conducted research on the life of women in the convent

in various books. In *Las mujeres en el cristianismo medieval: imágenes teóricas y cauces de actuación religiosa* (Muñoz Fernández 1989) and *Religiosidad femenina: expectativas y realidades* (Muñoz Fernández and Mar Graña Cid 1991) examine various forms of the religious life for women other than convent life which provides this study with sufficient evidence for why Zayas chose to promote only life in the convent as opposed to other female religious lifestyles. In *Acciones e intenciones de mujeres: vida religiosa de las madrileñas (ss. XV-XVI)* (Muñoz Fernández 1995) the possibilities of autonomy for those women who entered the convent are closely studied. These three works identify the expectations and realities for women in medieval times and in Early Modern Spain and provide the foundation for the project at hand which focuses more clearly on a writer of the Spanish Baroque period.

José Luis Sánchez Lora explored the subject of women in the convent and in society in his book on religiosity during the Spanish Baroque period. *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* (1988) outlines the life that women led during the time period, both within and outside of the convent and demonstrates the limited options for noble women because of the many hardships they found in a male dominated society. What remains to be studied for the purpose of this thesis is the thorough examination of both life paths for women during the Spanish Golden Age. More particularly, what remains to be studied is the period often identified as the Spanish Baroque and the relation of each path to experience and choice in Zayas' *Desengaños amorosos*. The premise is clear: Zayas seeks to illustrate to women that the convent is not only the safest option for noblewomen but also provides access to many opportunities not available to them outside of it. She does not describe life for women in the convent but each character either chooses the life in the convent or the selection is made for her. There is an obvious narrative reason for her utilization of such an institution as the destination for many of

her characters in *Desengaños amorosos*. This is because of the connection to an historical (albeit fictionalized) reality that early seventeenth-century readers of the *Desengaños* understood. For the discussion of the connection between literary representations and historical realities, I will rely on images of women's life in Spain from both historical research as it relates to the work of Zayas and on Zayas' fictional portrayal of both secular and convent life. In essence, then this thesis examines both the portrayal of Spanish Golden Age society and culture for unmarried and married noblewomen as portrayed in Zayas' fiction and, in particular, how the social environment in which she lived may have affected her choice of the convent as either a temporary or permanent life choice.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first is an in-depth analysis of the lives of secular noblewomen in Early Modern Spanish and more precisely, during the Spanish Baroque. The second chapter will closely analyze and examine the life for women in the convent and the many differences between secular and religious life for women. Finally, the third chapter will analyze the information provided in the first two chapters and its connection to the *Desengaños amorosos*.

The first chapter focuses on societal expectations of these noblewomen in the secular world. These expectations are closely analyzed and described before examining the experience of the female characters of the *Desengaños Amorosos* for comparison. In the case of the women in the *Desengaños*, as children, they were subjected to the power of the male head of household until he chose a suitable spouse for her. Cultural and social expectations demanded that, at an appropriate age, young women were to be married through an arranged social contract between a male member of her household and the future spouse or head of household of the future spouse.

Once married, these noblewomen were expected to obediently attend to their husband's needs throughout their lives (Sánchez Lora 46).

Similarly, social expectations for behavior and decency also demanded that respectable women be “enclosed” in the home so as not to ignite “lust” from men to whom they were not related. In the event of such an accident, the guilt of association with others was placed solely on the woman as she made the mistake of letting herself be seen (Defourneaux 146). She was “private” property and as such had no place in the public eye. According to Defourneaux, many husbands treated their wives very similarly to their slaves for fear that they might lose control of them, which would reflect on the reputation of the husband (Defourneaux 147). Hence, life for noblewomen in the outside “world” was not an easy one as any misstep—true or perceived by the head of household or others—led to peril. Societal expectations of compliance for noblewomen were high and often not easily attainable which Zayas clearly demonstrates in the tragic circumstances to which each main character in the *Desengaños* is subjected. The hardships that her characters experience leave them without the one true value that a woman possessed; her honor (Sánchez Lora 43). Through Zayas' tales, readers learn that the easiest way to measure up to the chaste and pure women that they were expected to be was not to live amongst family and in the domestic sphere but rather to enter into the convent. This was the best way to maintain the priceless commodity that was a woman's honor as her chastity and virginity, commodities on the social network for marriage, could be most easily preserved behind these walls that did not permit illicit or even accidental encounters with men.

In the second section of this thesis, the life of women in the convent setting is examined. Clearly, Zayas' works are directed towards women of a higher status who had the financial

means to enter into the convent and the “solution” for women whose honor had been tarnished or questioned or even for those noblewomen who were yet unmarried is always the convent. For this reason, it is imperative to provide the background for this selection both from a fictional and an historical perspective. Historians and cultural historians as well as literary critics have highlighted the choice for convent life for unmarried or widowed noblewomen with questionable honor for years. However, in chapter two I will discuss the attraction of the convent for all noblewomen, dishonored or otherwise.

Certainly, if unmarried noblewomen had been *allowed* to make their own choices between marriage and convent life, it seems plausible that some would have made the choice for convent life precisely because women in the convent were slightly less dependent on males than in the outside world and these women were often able to lead a somewhat autonomous life (Lehfeldt 184). While still enclosed as they would have been in the house in the event of marriage, contact with the male was much less (Lehfeldt 179) therefore lessening the possibility of violation and lust. In the case of Zayas’ *Desengaños* readers are exposed to unmarried and widowed women (both honorable as well as dishonored) who chose the convent. For this reason chapter two focuses on the more autonomous life and female hierarchy of the convent as a juxtaposition (and alternative) to life with the male head of household.

Zayas clearly demonstrates through all of the main female characters that contact with the male (not head of household) could and often did result in complete tragedy and destruction of the woman’s life through the loss of honorable reputation and virginity, requirements for marriage. Historical research indicates that in the enclosed walls of the convent, noblewomen were considerably less exposed to the dangerous, male dominated outside world. The atmosphere



of the convent made it much easier to maintain the chastity and purity that was expected of them. Furthermore, the convent provided numerous opportunities not available outside of it such as an education beyond the domestic obligations and chores of marriage. More importantly, it gave these women an opportunity to engage in close relationships with other women as well as the ability to express themselves as individuals through writing, spiritual development and prayer and through work associated with their convent or abbey. Whether in the convent to safeguard them before marriage or as a permanent vocation, these noblewomen were able to support each other and create a sense of community in their intent to lead a life dedicated to God (Lehfeldt 43). The convent provided a space for their development as individuals and as women while still meeting the high expectations of society that required purity, chastity, and obedience of its women.

Finally, Chapter three includes a careful examination of the life of women both inside and outside of the convent and their connection with the *Desengaños amorosos*. In this chapter, I analyze the *Desengaños amorosos* of María de Zayas and investigate the lessons learned through experience (both virtual through the reading/listening experience and “real” as portrayed by the characters in her *Desengaños*). I will apply the historical evidence of the first two chapters in comparison with the common elements and values presented in *Desengaños amorosos* as an exposé of the life of women during the time period. In particular, I examine how the fictional representations of noblewomen in the *Desengaños amorosos* serve as examples to real noblewomen who struggled against the power of the male centered society and feared bad marriages, social retribution, dishonor, and the like. The narrative structure of the *Desengaños* itself sets up the exemplary nature of the work. The storyteller uses example after example until the target audience makes a “good” decision to choose convent life over imminent marriage. The

strong societal influences and expectations of literary Golden Age in Spain as well as historical realities certainly served as motivation for Zayas' fictional pedagogy in which her constant message of the convent as the realistic and superior alternative for noblewomen. The narrative structure itself sets up the target audience and sets the stage for instructing those impressionable young women and making a case either for "playing it safe" by moving to the convent until a suitable and agreeable marriage contract was attained or for choosing a life away from the dangers of the mundane world in which passion led to dishonor for a spiritual world in which a noblewoman could attain purpose and fulfillment of societal expectations through development of the spiritual self in the service of God.

## Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to examine both literary and historical motivations for convent life as well as fictional representations and historical realities for these motivations. Therefore, my approach to critical literary analysis is more closely aligned with socio-historical literary criticism than it is with approaches that are psychoanalytical, formal or structural, for example. The questions I ask of the fictional text are those that are generated by comparison of the fictional literary context and the historical context as portrayed by writers, literary critics and historians. In this approach, texts are, in essence, akin to cultural artifacts that communicate ideas and notions about the society and culture that produced them.

In this study, a thorough examination of fictional representations of the life of women in the convent and the life of women outside the convent allows for a comparative analysis for the *Desengaños amorosos* as a social product of the time period. Nonfictional texts concerning the lives of secular women of the time period in works such as *Historia de las mujeres en España* by Margarita Ortega Lopez, *Culture and Control in CounterReformation Spain* edited by Anne J. Cruz and Mary Elizabeth Perry, and *The lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain* by Lisa Vollendorf provide the historical analysis of circumstances that secular noblewomen had in history as in literature. Additionally, other nonfictional texts concerning the cultural forces that affected the life of women in secular society or in the convent are utilized as well. Such texts include various studies of Angela Muñoz Fernandez as previously mentioned, *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* by José Luis Sánchez Lora, and *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: the Permeable Cloister* by Elizabeth A. Leffeldt. These critical historical and literary studies review the restricted nature of women's lives during the time period and many of these texts provide critical background information concerning both the life of women

inside and outside of the convent for this thesis. By first examining the lives of secular women, this study provides the cultural and historical information that is necessary to discuss the option and situation of the convent because these cultural environments offered no other option to women who could not meet the societal requirements for secular living. In discussing life in the convent, it is also imperative to describe women's life outside of it to accurately portray what led the fictional representative women from Zayas' works there. Therefore, despite the different topics of each chapter, in many cases the same resources were used for each.

While I rely both on a close critical reading of María de Zayas' *Desengaños* and its relations to other cultural literary texts produced in early seventeenth-century Spain, I do not ignore the important critical research concerning the historical reality of both secular and religious women's lives during the sixteenth and seventeenth century or the critical literary analysis of the fictional *novellas* of María de Zayas y Sotomayor by scholars. In studying the social and historical context of noblewomen during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the social lessons described in the *Desengaños amorosos* take shape and provide significant cultural explanations for women who had little choice in determining their future. The analysis of secular and convent life in history and fiction, then, provides a window to understanding, through literary analysis, the historical realities that informed a seventeenth-century audience of men or women whose future depended upon adherence to social and cultural values and practices.

Additionally, it is important to take into the account the natural bias of a female individual in the twenty first century. While closely examining historical and literary evidence from the time period itself; Early Modern Spain, it is inevitable that the attitude of women during the current time period in which women enjoy mainly the same rights as men may play a part in

the ideas expressed in this research. Though based on factual research, there is the possibility that the social mentality and ideals of the twenty first century came into play through the analysis of both historical and literary research and defining how the situation of women during this time period may or may not have influenced the writing of Maria de Zayas.

## Chapter One: The Life of a Secular Noblewoman in the Spanish Golden Age

In order to understand the choice of religious life over secular life, we must first understand what women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain perceived and experienced. The discussion below about secular life cannot be divorced from the very attitudes and practices that sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spaniards experienced in history. These attitudes promoted a conception of women's roles and responsibilities that were prescribed to a great extent by religious and cultural beliefs about male and female responsibilities in the secular world. For this reason, the life of noblewomen during the Golden Age in Spain was extremely inflexible as socially acceptable options for women were very few. Historical evidence shows the challenges that living in what some have called a *misogynous* Spanish society during this time period posed for women of all social and economic status. José Luis Sánchez Lora, author of *Mujeres, conventos, y formas de la religiosidad barroca*, for example, describes some of the prevalent ideas, values and notions held by Spanish society during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries regarding women of all social classes.

Aquí no hay solo una actitud de menosprecio, el que un jesuita del siglo XVI utilice al demonio en la comparación no es ningún recurso retórico sino la visión de la mujer como enemigo irreconciliable del hombre, causante de desdichas....con independencia del pecado original, la mujer viene al mundo ya marcada por la inferioridad por naturaleza (45).

Women were viewed as the ultimate enemy of men because their temptation led toward perdition. He points out that women were considered naturally inferior to men. Due to that idea they were permitted little control of their own lives. Maintaining control over women and their

behavior was a man's divine responsibility as is explained further by Sánchez Lora. "Por una parte, el varón, como dueño y cabeza de la mujer, será responsable del comportamiento de ésta, ya que ha sido puesta bajo su tutela por mandato divino" (51). The religious idea of subjugation of woman to man became manifest in Spanish society and was practiced in ways that allowed not only for the notion of a man serving as guardian and protector but also as the legitimate proprietary owner of a woman. This is where novel interpretation of this idea in history and fiction lays the groundwork for either fairness in treatment or for abuses.

What is important is that factual evidence shows the little influence women had on their own lives, and we see that this has been exposed in the literature of the time period as well. For example, María de Zayas' characters portray the trials of living as a noblewoman in the secular world and expose the dangers that women encounter when the head of household is absent, unavailable, uncaring or deceived by others, for example. In Zayas' fictional world, women are never safe in the secular world. Although often extreme, the tales told in her *Desengaños amorosos* are a clear product of the world in which María de Zayas y Sotomayor lived and wrote. The male dominated culture is reflected in the situations of her female protagonists. All noble, they are either married, engaged to be married, or waiting for a male authority figure to find them a suitable husband or enter them in the convent. The literary examples point out, albeit in fiction, that a noblewoman's life was not hers to control; it was always the responsibility of a man. Through historical research and the stories in *Desengaños amorosos* it is clear that a noblewoman's life from childhood and into adulthood was largely dependent on the decisions of a male.

The belief that man is superior to woman is one rooted deep within the Catholic religion. Founded on religious teachings that had been present for centuries, Ortega López highlights this

hierarchy between men and women by citing religious documents in the book *La historia de las mujeres en España*. As expressed in this passage below articulated by Saint Paul, man was created as the reflection of and the glory of God. Woman served the same purpose for man and she should be subjected to him throughout her life.

Quiero que sepáis que la cabeza de todo varón es Cristo, y la cabeza de la mujer, el varón... Porque esa imagen y gloria de Dios; la mujer es la gloria del varón, pues no procede el varón de la mujer, sino la mujer del varón, ni fue creado el varón para la mujer, sino la mujer para el varón (39).

Religious scripture illustrates not only that women were created for men by God. In scripture, the creation of woman and her willingness to be tempted was because of their naturally evil tendencies first exhibited in Eve. Thus women needed man to protect them from endangering themselves and others. The biblical image of Eve portrayed the female as the “instrument of the devil”. She demonstrated her inability to resist her own evils and wrongdoing in the Garden of Eden (Ortega López 39). The story of Adam and Eve served as proof that woman came into the world naturally marked as inferior (Sánchez Lora 45). Therefore societal beliefs held that she always be subjected to the man (Ortega López 39), whom God created as superior.

Sánchez Lora asserts that not only were women considered morally inferior to men (41), but intellectually and physically inferior as well. This belief can be attributed to the medieval theory of humors, a philosophical notion of the time period used to separate physical types of human beings. Ortega López explains in *Historia de las mujeres en España* that due to the naturally cold and humid humor of women, they were considered physically weak by nature, but



also curious, impetuous, with a high capacity for love and sensitivity, submission and passivity, and women possessed a supposed voracity and sexual passion (254, my translation). According to this premise, women were born into the world marked by preconceived personality traits and expected physical temperaments. Yet despite these traits that might in some situations be perceived as negative and in others as positive, women in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries were expected to maintain their purity and chastity virtuously. It was their most precious treasure (Sánchez Lora 149). A contradiction existed between societal expectations of women as pure and chaste beings (but beings who could not resist temptation) and the beliefs concerning women's weak and sinful nature (but who had the responsibility to resist temptation to demonstrate obedience and submission to the head of household). This inconsistency shaped by secular and religious teachings alike created a difficult life for women striving to meet the high standards and expectations for them in a harsh and unforgiving society.

From very early childhood, the process of educating noble girls to become respectable noblewomen was one of extreme importance because any misstep by the girl or young woman had the expected outcome of affecting the head of household, the guardian and protector of a family's honor. Within the confines of the household walls, these young women were taught the mannerisms and expectations of proper women through the example of their mother and her teachings (Ortega López 257). While it was the father who maintained control of the entire family and household, it was the mother who was responsible for demonstrating to their daughters the basic domestic knowledge necessary for their future (Ortega López 257). The purpose of their education in the household was solely to prepare them for their future outside of their family's home. Ideally, this future held one socially acceptable option; marriage (Ortega López 268).

Unlike the sons of Spanish noble families, who were expected to learn the duties of their father in order to one day manage a family and estate, the instruction of the daughter was centered around their development to one day be a good wife, that is a good servant to her husband and God. Women learned the basics of keeping a household such as cooking and sewing as well as religious duties necessary of all respectable Catholic Christian women in seventeenth-century Spain (Ortega López 257). It was not a high priority that they learn to read or write as this was considered the source of loose behavior (Defourneaux 154) that would harm their validity as pure and chaste women suitable for marriage. Additionally, education of women was simply unnecessary due to their supposed lack of intellectual capacity (Sánchez Lora 49).

Spanish women faced not only religious beliefs that prevented them from pursuing an education, but secular beliefs and practices as well. Sánchez Lora quotes Huarte de San Juan, a well known physician and psychologist of the time period in *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* and reveals the secular sixteenth and seventeenth-century notion of women as the naturally weaker sex:

Huarte de San Juan, en su examen de ingenios para las ciencias, dice: “los padres que quisieran gozar de hijos sabios y que tengan habilidad para letras, han de procurar que nazcan varones, porque las hembras, por razón de la frialdad y humedad de su sexo, no pueden alcanzar ingenio profundo. (49)

Women had to be considered inferior and without profound intellect. For this reason, Huarte de San Juan suggests that ought to try to engender male children since they would be the only ones capable of gaining great wisdom through study. Huarte de San Juan asserted that women lacked

the intellectual capacity to read and write held by their male counterparts, contributing even further to society's belief of women's natural inferiority.

In the continuation of Huarte de San Juan's writings he reveals that women, unlike their male counterpart, are prone to talk of silly things and that they are incapable of learning to read Latin, imitating what they hear and repeating what they have learned through rote memory. "Solo vemos que hablan con alguna apariencia de habilidad en materias livianas y fáciles, con términos comunes y muy estudiados pero metidas en letras, no pueden aprender más que un poco de latín, y esto por ser obra de la memoria (31)" (49).

Reading and writing was simply not necessary for women due to the careful division of labor between both sexes in Spanish society (Ortega López 268). Women were meant to remain in the house, provide instruction for servants, care for the children, and obey their husbands. The extent of their control was in the private sphere, tending to the household. Men, on the other hand, were responsible for business outside of the household and financially for supporting their family. Men needed to be and were considered to be intellectually superior by nature because they needed to oversee the household from the public sphere. The required skills for engaging in business arrangements and responding to economic, social and political shifts made writing more important for them than for their female counterparts who were confined to the private sphere and, in essence, part of the property of the head of household.

Despite the fact that a formal academic education was considered unnecessary for women in sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish society, there were some noblewomen who did manage to be educated beyond the duties of the household. Due to a lack of public education for girls or boys, this education most often took place within the household. In some noble

households young women may have been educated beyond social expectations, as far as the family saw fit, which sometimes included reading and writing and the study of Latin (Ortega López 292). Zayas is a historical example of one of the few educated noblewomen as she was born into a noble household herself. Through her extensive education she managed to become a prominent author of the time period (Vasileski 11). Literary instances of educated Noblewomen are also portrayed in several of her female protagonists. One such example is that of Doña Isabel in *La esclava de su amante*. Doña Isabel explains that her parents considered education, especially reading and writing, a necessary component of her Christian training.

Críeme hasta llegar a los doce años entre las caricias y regalos de mis padres; que, claro es que no habiendo tenido otro de su matrimonio, serían muchos, enseñándome entre ellos las cosas más importantes a mi calidad. Ya se entenderá, tras las virtudes que forman una persona virtuosamente cristiana, los ejercicios honestos de leer, escribir, tañer, y danzar, con todo lo demás competentes a una persona de mis prendas, y de todas aquellas que los padres desean ver enriquecidas a sus hijas (Yllera 128).

Through the voice of Doña Isabel, Zayas provides a literary example of one of the few women who managed to be educated beyond the domestic sphere in the honest “exercises” of the mind: reading, writing, learning to play a musical instrument and social dancing. Doña Isabel elaborates that her case was an extreme one as far as reading and writing was concerned. Being the only child of her parents, they trained and educated her as a proxy for a son. However, it becomes evident throughout her story that the benefits of possessing this knowledge as a woman in the secular world are very few. She is able to sing and to write poetry to entertain the guests at the *sarao* in which she is telling her story, but beyond her ability to entertain, there appears to be very few positive uses or outcomes of her education. Despite her intelligence, her honor and

social status are destroyed by Don Manuel, when he repeatedly refuses to marry her after violating her and therefore robbing her of her honor. She eventually disguises herself and takes on the duties of a slave for lack of socially acceptable options in her situation.

Doña Isabel is a literary example of the very few noblewomen who were educated beyond what was socially required but does not reveal the manner by which she was educated. She may have been one of the select few women of only the highest status who were privileged enough to have tutors in their home (Ortega López 292). Other girls were sent to a convent as young girls with the objective of continuing or completing their education. Regardless of the manner in which these privileged women learned, Ortega López argues that they rarely accomplished significantly more than the ability to write anything beyond their own signature (Ortega López 292).

Education for girls was obtained not only through the exercise of reading and writing but also social interaction. Their development took place through contact with other women who interacted with them as part of their training. Girls often developed very close relationships with other females in the household and it was not uncommon for girls and single young women to form close bonds resembling friendships with their servants and even slaves (Ortega López 257). Noble women were seldom alone in their own household due to nature of the duties they had as well as the obligations that servants were expected to realize in the household. This kind of relationship between noble women and their servants or slaves shown in historical research is clearly present in several of Zayas' stories.

A textual example of this type of relationship is the friendship formed between Doña Lisis and her slave Zelima, who in fact is a noblewoman disguised as a slave. The text cites “que

no era como de señora y esclava, sino de dos queridas hermanas” (Yllera 117). Zayas demonstrates the relationship between these two characters more as that of sisters than of a noblewoman and her slave.

Additionally, the young Laurela of *Amar solo para vencer* treated her servants more as playmates than as servants but it is the close relationship she forms with her young female servant that in the end leads her to her destruction. She placed her trust and affection in this servant, unaware that she was not a servant but a young man who wished to gain her hand in marriage, thus robbing her of her honor through simply being alone with Laurela. The exploration of these two fictional relationships indicates both the potential dangers as well as positive outcomes of such relationships between servants and masters. Friendship and trust are the delights of human interaction. Social deception is a dangerous game with dire social consequences. Zayas suggests with these two examples of deception that a woman was susceptible to dangers even in her own home.

Relationships with slaves and servants were not the only female bonds created in the household. Historically, women’s relationships with their mothers often were very strong. Even after leaving their home to be married or enter the convent, they seldom forgot about where they came from and still kept in contact with, in particular, their mother (Ortega López 260). In the work of Zayas, the reader is exposed to several examples of maternal relationships. For example, in the frame story, Doña Lisis’ relationship with her mother is so strong that, after entering the convent, her mother joins her soon after, unable to part from her beloved daughter.

Y en poniendo Laura la hacienda en orden, que les rentase lo que habían menester, se fue con ellas, por no apartarse de su amada Lisis, avisando a su madre de doña Isabel, que

como supo donde estaba su hija, se vino también con ella, tomando el hábito de religiosa, donde se supo como don Felipe había muerto en la guerra (Yllera 510).

In addition to the benefit of being reunited with her daughter, as a widow, moving to the convent was the socially acceptable alternative to living alone without male protection. Additionally, despite having been separated for years, Doña Isabel's mother joins her in the convent after the death of her husband. These instances indicate the strong bond that is maintained even through years of separation between a mother and daughter as well as the function of the convent as an alternative to the dangers of living without a male head of household for widows. Zayas emphasizes the safe-haven of relationships and living circumstances found in the convent for unmarried, unmarriageable or widowed women who have no male head of household.

Spanish noble women in the works of Zayas did not always have successful female relationships with a mother, servant or cousin. In fact, in contrast to the previous depictions of close mother-daughter relationships, the mother is more often an absent character in the literature of Zayas and many of the female-female relationships are dangerous. For example, Doña Inés of *La inocencia castigada* is brought up as an orphan in the home of her brother and sister-in-law. Doña Florentina of *Estragos que causa el vicio* loses her mother as a child and although her father remarried, the young Florentina is orphaned. Doña Mencía of *El traidor contra su sangre* lives under the tutelage of her brother and father in the absence of a maternal figure. The protagonist of *Mal presagio casar lejos*, Doña Blanca, lacks both parental figures.

In sharp contrast to a girl's relationship with her mother, according to Ortega López in *La historia de las mujeres en España*, a girl's relationship with her father was often less affectionate. An affectionate father was, in society's eyes, looked down upon. The

father/daughter relationship stood opposed to that of the father and son. It was the father's duty to impart the duties of the male authority figure on his son as early as the age of seven. Just as the daughter must be taught the ways of the household by the mother or an aunt or even a lady servant, the son had to learn how to successfully control a household and care for the women of that household. He was taught this in a very severe and strict manner as affection and caring were considered feminine traits (Ortega López 257).

The education of the sons was perhaps even more important because it would one day be their duty to assume the responsibility of the family, find suitable husbands for their daughters, provide financial support through contact with the outside world, and to manage the rest of the household, servants and slaves. In the event of the father's death or absence, it was the son who would eventually take up the duties that were left behind. All inheritance would go to the son along with the responsibility of caring for the women of the household (Ortega López 257). It was his duty to control and insure proper behavior of the women in the household in whatever manner necessary.

Indeed, in the work of Zayas, the image of the dominant male authority figure, either brother, father, uncle, or husband is a recurring one and is often portrayed as extremely strict and sometimes violent. In order to avenge his sister's honor, Don Juan, the brother of Octavia in *La más infame venganza*, violates the wife of the man who did the same to Octavia. After discovering her intentions to marry without his consent, the father of the young Doña Laurela in *Amar solo para vencer* sends her to live with her aunt and uncle where she is brutally murdered. Don Alonso and Don Pedro, the father and brother of Doña Mencía of *El traidor contra su sangre*, stab her to death after discovering her intentions to marry against their will. After being falsely accused of adultery Doña Inés of *La inocencia castigada*, is locked up alive into a wall by



her husband, her brother and his wife. While it is necessary to recognize these examples as fictional and often extreme, they are a clear indication of the power that the male was authorized to exercise during this time period. In some of these cases, the men and their conniving female counterparts were punished for their extreme cruelty but more often than not, many of these extreme punishments and controls were executed in private without retribution.

Zayas' fiction points out the woman's lack of awareness of social dangers in her home environment and the certain powerlessness of the female in her own home life and in the social environment surrounding her. In this situation, it is also crucial to recognize the woman's obligation and influence on the social standing of the family and the honor of the male head of household. Not only was the female entrusted with domestic responsibilities, but she was also the repository of the most important treasure, her honor and the family's reputation. Honor was the base of all order in Spanish sixteenth and seventeenth century nobility and in losing her own honor, she dishonored not only herself but her entire family (Sánchez Lora 51). In fact, honor came to be almost synonymous with the noblewoman's life. If an individual lost her honor, her life lost importance (Voltes et al 77) and affected the head of household adversely. The social importance of a woman's honor is another prevailing theme throughout the writing of Zayas since all of the main characters in the *Desengaños* lose their honor and suffer as a result. Through each of the stories of *Desengaños amorosos*, it is repeatedly shown that a woman without her honor is unacceptable in the eyes of her family and in society.

Doña Inés of *La inocencia castigada* is locked up due to her perceived loss of honor as is Doña Elena of *Tarde llega el desengano*, Doña Florentina of *Estragos que causa el vicio*, Doña Laurela of *Amar solo para vencer*, and Doña Mencía of *Traidor contra su sangre* are all brutally murdered by the male figures in their lives after others determine that they had lost their honor. It

becomes apparent throughout the stories that the perception and belief of others is more important than fact in the work of Zayas. Many of these women were, in fact, innocent of the accusations against them yet still suffered grave consequences despite their innocence. The existence of such allegations provided sufficient grounds for their punishment. The warning in the *Desengaños* is clear: Dangers lie in wait for women in all places except the convent for neither father nor brother nor sister-in-law nor servant can be trusted when it comes to opportunism and social perception.

The text also makes clear that in these literary examples, it is the male who must take the initiative to right the “wrong” that these women supposedly committed. Due to the societal beliefs of the lower intellectual and physical capabilities of women, the duty of protecting the honor of his wife, daughter, or sister fell on the male head of household and he was obligated to deal with the perceived or real infraction again honor. His duty was to keep the women of his household enclosed from society. If somehow this woman were to lose her honor, this dishonor did not only fall on the female in question, but on her entire family as well as it became publicly known that the male head of household had been unable to keep his property in line.

Through protecting the honor and virginity of his daughter, sister, sister-in-law, or other female relative, the head of household was protecting his own honor (Sánchez Lora 51). The actions of the males as demonstrated in the *Desengaños amorosos* are evidence of their perceived duties and the extreme lengths taken to assume those responsibilities. Again, although fictional, the writings of María de Zayas provide a clear representation of male authority and the complex influences that it had in all aspects of female life.

The preservation of a noblewoman's honor as well as her ability to marry into another family of noble blood both reveal that the social standing of a family was largely dependent on the obedience and subservience of Spanish noble women. Despite the misogynous nature of Spanish society during this time period, the true importance of women in the structure of society was undeniable. Ortega López explains the impact of a marriage on a family's social standing: "Las hijas servían como medio para ampliar lazos familiares con otras familias, de los estamentos aristocráticos, u obtener mejor posición social en otras zonas geográficas" (269). A daughter's suitable matrimony served as a means to expand and create social connections with other families both geographically and socially.

For those of noble status, marrying someone of a lower status was simply not acceptable as such a marriage did not serve the purpose of a social contract meant to advance the family's social status or economic well-being (268). Zayas shows readers that this in the case of Laurela in *Amar solo para vencer* who agrees to marry Don Esteban, a man of substantially lower social status. After finding out, her uncle and aunt arrange her "accidental death". Here we see that the clear lines drawn between social statuses are not to be crossed as doing so may result in dire outcomes for both the woman involved and their families.

A proper marriage was of utmost importance for families of noble birth since it was a good way to unite territories and landownership, tighten political ties or to improve social standing. Historical evidence as well as literary shows the important role that marriage played in the life of a noblewoman. It should be noted, however, not all daughters managed to be placed in a suitable marriage. If, for example, the family could not afford the sufficient dowry for all of their daughters to enter into marriage, they might be obligated to take the only other route available to women, the convent. Families sometimes chose this life for their daughters as it was

a slightly less expensive option than marriage but still fostered the preservation of her honor (Ortega López 268). Two characters in Zayas' *Desengaños*, Don Pedro and Don Alonso, the father and brother of Doña Mencía do so. The two men in *Traidor contra su sangre* greedily determine to send her to the convent as a means to pay a smaller dowry for her. This would, in turn, leave them with a larger savings than had they paid the larger marriage dowry.

In the event of marriage to a suitable spouse, women's lives did not change immensely. They were still expected to obediently remain in the household and maintain their honor but at this point the role of the male authority figure was transferred to her husband. It would then be the husband who took on the responsibility of caring for them in financial and social terms, essentially providing for them and requiring that they preserve the family's honor (Deformeaux 148).

Juan Luis Vives, a prominent Spanish scholar and humanist during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a book called *La mujer cristiana de los deberes del marido* which outlined the many expectations of respectable noble married women. The most notable of these expectations is the code of silence. Sánchez Lora quotes Vives in *Mujeres, conventos, y formas de la religiosidad barroca* and explains the required isolation for these *honest* women who were to remain silent.

Porque así como la naturaleza...hizo a las mujeres para que encerradas guardasen la casa, así las obliga a que cerrasen la boca...porque el hablar nace del entender y las palabras no son sino como imágenes de lo que el ánimo concibe en el mismo; por donde, así como a la mujer buena y honesta la naturaleza no la hizo para el estudio de las ciencias, ni para negocios de dificultades, sino para un solo oficio simple y doméstica así las limitó el

entendimiento, y , por consiguiente, les tasó las palabras y las razones...han de guardar siempre la casa y el silencio (Sánchez Lora 50).

According to Juan Luis Vives, a woman's responsibility was to obediently maintain the house and silence. They were created with limited intellectual capabilities so that they could best meet the needs of their husband in the household. This attitude was a justification for the sometimes harsh treatment of women at the time but it also goes against the very nature of women as social beings and led to terrible domestic relations in whom the woman was expected to repress her opinions, speech and habits. As Deforneaux stated in his book *Daily Life in Spain in the Golden Age*: "Husbands who want their wives to behave are such tyrants that they treat their wives almost as slaves, fearing that reasonable freedom would emancipate them from all the rules of modesty which are scarcely understood and badly observed by the fair sex (147)." Therefore any independence or defiance in word or deed enacted by Spanish noble women had potentially violent outcomes at the hands of their husbands, brothers and other male heads of household. Even women who feared social retribution turned on their own "family" by issuing cruel punishment or banishment of other women in their household who did not meet their perception of social obedience. Doña Inés' sister-in-law is an extreme example of such a woman in Zayas' works.

Such acts of disobedience could be as small as contradicting the expectation of silence or leaving the confines of the home without permission and often had severe consequences. (Birriel Salcedo 55). Deliberately opposing her husband's wishes could easily end in physical abuse since society's expectation of men to exercise their superiority over women included violence (Birriel Salcedo 55). Readers repeatedly see numerous such instances in the many extreme cases of *Desengaños amorosos*. Doña Mencía is stabbed to death after disobediently agreeing to marry

her lover against the wishes of her brother and father. Doña Magdalena is beaten and killed by her husband when he suspects her of committing adultery. Another method of punishment was imprisoning women and therefore completely restricting movement and communication with family members or the outside world. Such was the case for Doña Inés of *La inocencia castigada* and Doña Elena of *Tarde llega el desengaño*.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, silence and docility of women in the presence of any male authority figure were essential to avoid such situations of life threatening violence and abuse (Sánchez Lora 72). If a woman were to commit the most unacceptable form of disobedience which was any improper interaction with any unrelated male, her husband had legal rights to kill both her and the man involved to avenge his honor (Ortega López 276). The justification for such severe punishment was the notion of honor and the belief that a woman's honor was reflected in her husband's and family's reputation (Voltes and Buxo 77). Evidence of the helplessness of women and the power of men in such situations is portrayed in Zayas stories.

In *Estragos que causa el vicio*, Doña Florentina engages in adulterous relations with Don Dionís, the husband of her stepsister, Doña Magdalena. When Don Dionís is advised, although falsely, that his wife is unfaithful to him he becomes overcome with jealous rage and kills her. Men were legally able to kill an adulterous wife even if he himself was guilty of the same wrongdoing (Ortega López 276).

A further hardship of being a wife and adhering to strict rules and expectations was the issue of absent husband. Ortega López reveals that during the seventeenth century only in forty eight percent of marriages did the father and his son live in the same house (270). It was increasingly common that the husband would be gone for extended periods of time on business

and travel. Many men left the country to pursue wealth in the Americas or to fight in the war (Vasileski 17). Absent male authority figures made it even more difficult for a woman to obediently follow the rules of her husband as he was not there to monitor her behavior or to protect her from dangers. Women were often tempted to oppose the rules set forth by their absent husbands, both the trivial and the crucial ones (Deformeaux 147) because the restrictions went against their supposed natural tendency of curiosity (Ortega López 254) and, more likely, the natural temptation to discover through experimentation and learning.

Experimentation and discovery were not encouraged, however. Not only were society's rules reinforced within the household but outside of it as well. Women were advised not to leave the house without their face covered and to always have a husband, father, or brother to accompany them. When women acted outside of these social constraints concerning noble behavior, violation to their honor was often the outcome (Ortega López 284). Once they left the control of the private sphere, any public interaction was dangerous territory. The action by women against prescribed social interactions could either have been caused by the woman's deliberate rebellion or an accidental contact with another man. In either case, she would be blamed and punishment against her was essential to correct her inappropriate behavior. The correction was necessary not only to restore the male's honor but also to assert power over her in an attempt to prevent such behavior from occurring again (Sánchez Lora 71).

Zayas demonstrates that even the seemingly harmless act of leaving the house unaccompanied, as is the case in *La inocencia castigada* with Doña Inés, could be extremely detrimental for both the male's and the female's honor. Though the character did not intend to cause distress by leaving the house accompanied first by her husband and then unaccompanied when her husband was absent, this one simple action ended in disaster when a nobleman became

so in love with her that he used a curse to lure her into visiting his home at night. Though she was not in control of herself under the curse, her husband still took this as an affront to his own honor and to avenge it, he locked her (with the help of her own brother and sister-in-law) in a small cell for six years until she was discovered and released from her torment. The suggestion is that no matter how unintentional the interaction, the woman would most likely be punished to the extreme since she was of no use in the private sphere or in the public sphere without honor.

It is not only the fictional accounts that show the importance of female obedience and guardianship. Countless texts from the time period reiterate the importance of the woman to stay at home. Sánchez Lora quotes Fray Hernando de Talavera, a monk during the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, who recalled the subjugation of women according to biblical verse.

Porque comúnmente las mujeres están y fueron hechas para estar encerradas e ocupadas en sus casas, y los varones para andar e procurar las cosas de fuera. (20) Y vuelve a la sentencia divina: “la dueña...en todo lo que no es malo es obligada a conformar con el querer e voluntad de su marido, como el súbdito religioso a la voluntad de su prelado. (21) (Sánchez Lora 46).”

The woman’s work in the domestic sphere and her will and obedience to men compares favorably to the spiritual sheep in the shepherd’s flock, but the woman is relegated only to the private sphere unlike the sheep that are in the public sphere. Sánchez Loras continues this idea by quoting Juan Luis Vives in *La perfecta casada* who reiterates this idea. “Como son los hombres para lo público, así las mujeres para el encerramiento,...asi ellas el encerrarse y el encubrirse” (19) These two examples from the time period are evidence that men were concerned about promoting the role that women must fill as married Christian women. They were made to



remain in the household and tend to domestic tasks and men were to tend to business outside of the household. In the domestic sphere, a woman was obligated to careful attendance to her husband.

Disobedience in this regard could be the cause of severe marital issues and punishment. Yet even with issues of adulterous relations and disobedience in the household, the case of an annulment or legal spiritual divorce was extremely rare. The Catholic Church did not promote any type of marital separation and did not condone marriage of either party after the dissolution of the marriage by means of separation. Ortega López outlines the situation for the dissolution of the conjugal knot as only acceptable in the rarest and most extreme of situations.

La iglesia la concedía solo en casos muy extremos: malos tratos, adulterio, alcoholismo, locura...’ eran factores determinantes, aunque no los únicos. Mientras se podían separar los cuerpos y los bienes de los afectados, pero nunca se obtenía la disolución del vínculo. El divorcio eximía a los cónyuges de los débitos matrimoniales, podían hacer vida aparte, pero nunca contraer una nueva relación sentimental (277).

Even in the unlikely case that they were granted this separation, the possibility of another marriage was unacceptable. The dissolution of the conjugal unit in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Spain is comparable to a separation in today’s world, still constrained by the legal contract of marriage. A divorce, then, meant the agreement to spend the rest of their lives apart but unavailable for future sentimental or conjugal relationships. In these cases, neither man nor woman was free to marry anew.

While a man in such a separation could live and conduct his regular business as an unmarried man during this time period, it was unacceptable for a woman in the same situation.

Living in a household without a male authority figure was extremely taboo (Vollendorf 147). In the eyes of society, women simply were not suited to living alone. Furthermore, such a lifestyle was detrimental to the preservation of the noble female's honor since the power of a male was necessary to protect her from her own evils (Sánchez Lora 41). Therefore, in most cases, it was socially preferable for a woman to remain in an unhappy marriage and household than pursue legal separation unless she had the financial means to enter the convent or could find refuge in the home of a male relative.

Zayas shows in several fictional examples that even those women living in the house of relatives had limitations for their safety. Doña Florentina of *Estragos que causa el vicio* lived with her stepsister Doña Magdalena and her brother-in-law Don Dionís but ended up having an adulterous relationship with Don Dionís. Doña Isabel of *Esclava de su amante*, while living in a house with her family along with the family of her landlord, lost her honor due to the amorous attentions of the landlord's son.

Although noblewomen were for the most part confined to their households and the obedient attendance to their husbands, women did have the opportunity to leave the home and play a role in life outside the household on specific occasions. The participation in public affairs was primarily for religious purposes (Deforneaux 158). Indeed, their religious responsibilities were among the few societal expectations of women that were not domestic.

While a noblewomen's church attendance covered religious duties such as confession, mass, and prayers, it often served a secular function as well. The church turned into a place for social gathering for women of the time period and was the only acceptable public place for women to congregate. Not only were they able to fulfill their duties as respectable Christian

women but it was also an opportunity to for them to chat, gossip, and simply spend time with people other than family and servants (Ortega López 280).

Although the church was considered a socially acceptable gathering place for women, this does not necessarily mean it was a safe place for the preservation of their honor. As the only suitable place for women to be outside of the home, the church often turned into a center for gallantry. Women in church were often a subject for the wandering eyes of men, who knew the church was the one place where they might have the opportunity to see the marriageable noble women of the city or to be seen (Ortega López 280). Doña Inés of *La inocencia castigada* and Doña Florentina of *Estragos que causan el vicio* are two textual examples of this dangerous public aspect of church attendance in Zayas' writing. Don Diego was smitten with love with the beautiful Doña Inés after having seen her in the church and Don Gaspar also was tempted when he saw Doña Florentina at Mass. These two examples prove that there are those will ill-conceived intentions even at the most sacred and spiritual of places. The point that Zayas makes with these two examples is that not only are the innocent at risk when they venture out in public but that women should recognize that bad intentions on the part of anyone can be found everywhere: amongst the servants in the home, at church, in the company of one's husband at public artistic affairs, in the very presence of those who are meant to protect her from evildoers.

The fear of betrayal in the public sphere had to be measured with the importance of taking part in the local community as the wife of a noble. For example, another way for noblewomen to leave the confines of the household and still retain her honor was to attend one of the many religious celebrations. As attending mass was expected and also socially acceptable, so was attending these celebrations. Yet while it may have been socially acceptable, any contact with men could cause potential damage to a woman's honor. However, these religious gatherings

played a large role in Spanish society and were a place where women could interact with each other and still be seen outside the household.

The Sarao of Doña Lisis in the frame story of *Desengaños amorosos* is a textual example of the realistic nature of Zayas' novels and one in which she uses the public sphere as a setting. Doña Lisis hosts a three day celebration in anticipation of her upcoming wedding. Celebrations like this led to the fulfillment of their religious and social duties but were also events that enabled noblewomen to socialize with other women and, in many cases, with men. The positive outcome of this type of interaction is that women could observe actions and hear the opinions of others to compare their own opinion and situation with the opinions and situations of others. In the case of the frame story, it is on the basis of hearing shared stories and responses that Lisis comes to a decision about convent life.

While domestic life was to be the center of a noblewoman's life, it required another important function which was motherhood. Giving birth to produce an heir was considered the primary biological purpose of the female body. In Spain during this time period, the average number of children in a noble household was four or five children. The time between births was considerably more than in other areas of Europe which could be due to a number of issues including the frequent absence of husbands due to the nature of travel for business or war (Ortega López 271).

The woman's ability to have children as well as her abilities as a mother were the source of constant scrutiny. The outcome of the child reflected upon the mother. For example, if the child was born with any sort of mental challenges, it was assumed to be the result of a lack of honesty and common sense in the mother (Ortega López 273). In lower class houses, the task of

the mother was not only bringing up and educating the children, but caring for them, making them food and clothing. However, for noble women who had servants and slaves, their physical responsibilities as mothers were substantially fewer, though no less important in terms of overseeing that these things were completed properly. They had the responsibility of simply allocating the purchase of their necessities and many maternal duties, including breastfeeding, to their slaves and servants, and insuring that it was done properly. The domestic duties that they themselves carried out were often no more than some embroidery or decoration of the household. Their primary personal responsibilities mostly consisted of assisting mass and saying their daily prayers (Ortega López 278).

Unmarried daughters and married women living outside of the convent in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries faced many challenges. They were born into a world in which they were naturally considered inferior, spiritually, intellectually and physically. From childhood into womanhood they were taught how to act according to the ideals of society. As young girls and later as married women, they were destined to stay in the household and obey their male authority figures. As girls, their father or other male relative was responsible for their future. As soon as she reached a suitable age for marriage, the male head of household either found a suitor of equal status or made an arrangement for her future living situation as best he could. After marriage, the powers that her male relative once exercised upon her were transferred to her husband. The power of the male was considered necessary to protect her from her own evils as a female. The male's protection was needed to guard women from their naturally weak tendencies and shield her from the loss of her honor. The importance of a woman's honor was not only a reflection of her own worth but also the status of her family and was even essential in the bonds that held society together. It was through the preservation of a woman's honor that she

was able to marry and advance the well-being of her family. If she lost her honor, so did her father, brother, or husband. While she was able to leave the house at times, she did so at her own risk and the church was considered the only acceptable destination outside of the house.

The woman's lack of free-will and power in her own life is extremely evident both in historical information as well as the stories of María de Zayas. Zayas demonstrates that, while marriage may have been the societal ideal, choosing to submit to these restrictions was often certainly less than ideal. Through extreme literary examples she portrays the many dangerous possibilities of remaining in the secular world and entering into the social contract of matrimony. The negative image of life for women in the secular world depicted by Zayas is contrasted by her constant use of the convent as the ultimate home for her female characters that were socially made unfit for marriage through contact with men and their deceiving female counterparts.

Life in the convent for Spanish noblewomen was the one socially acceptable alternative to married life. In the following chapter I will discuss in depth the lifestyle that women in the convent led either as nuns or secular women and explain the relevant details that may have made it the preferable option over marriage as alluded to in the endings of Zayas' *Desengaños amorosos*. The close examination of convent life will provide a more complete understanding of María de Zayas' motives in utilizing this institution as a solution to the tragedies of many of her characters.

## Chapter Two: Life in the Convent as an Alternative to the Secular Life for Noblewomen

Convent life for women during the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Spain was the one acceptable alternative to the married life since it was the only option which also protected their honor and allowed them to meet societal ideals. Intensive research into the topic shows that not only did it provide them a means to regain or maintain societal respect but it also provided them with various opportunities not available to them in the secular world. These opportunities include education in reading and writing, and the ability to develop a sense of individualism and autonomy.

Zayas and historical literature alike show that Spanish noblewomen faced an extremely inflexible future due to the restrictive religious and scientific teachings regarding their natural dispositions. Sánchez Lora argues in *Mujeres, conventos, y formas de la religiosidad barroca* that women's "weaknesses" expanded to a problem even larger than their effect on themselves and their immediate families. "Ya no es solo aquel moralismo medieval que ve en la mujer un instrumento del demonio para arrastrar al hombre al pecado y la condenación; esto continua, pero junto a otro componente mucho más vigoroso; la mujer como factor de disolución social (41)."

The medieval moralistic belief was that woman was an instrument of the devil and was capable of causing serious harm to men's spiritual and religious well-being through temptation. She was also, therefore, the potential cause of destruction to the carefully constructed Spanish society. In order to guard against the potential harm of women to themselves and to others, noblewomen were confined to the home, always under close supervision of a male authority figure who was either the father, brother, husband, or other male family member. But what

happened if this male authority was absent or nonexistent? Fiction and historical research provide insight to the role of the convent for a woman who lacked a male authority figure or who was unfit for marriage.

A woman who no longer had the option of marriage was one who had lost her honor through inappropriate relations with an un-related man or had disobeyed the male authority figure in her life, referred to by Ortega López in *Historia de las mujeres en España* as “las delincuentes” (287). Widows made up another of these marginal groups of women who did not possess the male authority figure so essential for all women and instead found protection in the convent. According to society, these women needed someone to watch over them, as it was society’s belief that a woman could not be left to live voluntarily on her own. She was neither equipped to handle the business of her own household in the public sphere nor was she intellectually equipped to make major decisions. Sánchez Lora discusses the problem posed by these “unprotected” women and how they were dealt with:

Y es que, para toda mujer sin dueño, cualquiera que sea la causa, no existe cauce de vivir honorable, a salvo su fama de las murmuraciones, que el claustro. Viudedad y soltería fueron, en la mujer, dos estados colocados siempre en el punto de mira de la sospecha porque, ¿Quién garantiza su honra? ¿Quién pone riendas a su “natural torcido”? Aquí aparece el convento ofertando encierro, salvaguarda pública de la honra (la honra siempre es pública) y sustento material (139).

Single women living independently from a male were not to be trusted and were a danger to themselves and society because of their supposed moral weakness. Alone they could not protect their honor which meant they needed someone else to do so and shield them from their own



supposed evil as portrayed by religious and philosophic teachings (Ortega López 39). It was the convent that provided the defense necessary for noblewomen. Stephanie Merrim describes this function of the convent for noble women both during the time of Zayas writings and still a century later in her book *Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. She explains that “The patriarchal arbiters of the early modern Christian worlds provided a place on the margins of society for women who in a multitude of ways fell between the cracks of the social structure. That space was the convent (103).”

The concept of the convent as the alternative life for these problematic noblewomen is frequently portrayed in María de Zayas' *Desengaños amorosos*. After losing their honor, their betrothed, their husband or their virginity, and therefore “falling between the cracks of the social structure” as stated by Merrim, Doña Inés, Doña Florentina, Doña Isabel, and Doña Camila are placed in the convent as a means to house a woman who no longer has a “dueño” or a lord who “owns” her. Doña Inés, a married woman who is controlled physically by a curse that possesses her and forces her to frequent her admirer's home at night and to be raped by him, is emotionally tortured by her nightmares, harassed by her admirer and physically tortured by her husband, brother and sister-in-law. Only after she is rescued from her imprisonment in a chimney wall, emaciated and blind, does she enter a convent to spend the rest of her days. Likewise, after engaging in adulterous relations with her brother-in-law, Doña Florentina is left with no male authority figure or honor and she also seeks solace and protection within the convent. After disguising herself as a slave and fruitlessly pursuing the man who had robbed her of her virginity and honor, Doña Isabel decides that, with the permission of her master, serving God in the convent is the best option for her. Finally, Doña Camila enters the convent after having been robbed of her honor by the brother of her husband's ex-lover.

Through the shelter of the convent the reputation of these women would be carefully protected despite their tragic stories. As noblewomen, they each were wealthy enough to gain admittance into the convent since the financial obligations necessary for entrance meant the representation of the lower classes was small (Lehfeldt 39). The convent was a place where these women could be isolated from further punishment and temptation. In the convent they could live out their days outside the eye of the gossipers.

Elizabeth Lehfeldt further describes the role of the convent in maintaining a woman's honor and purity in *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: A Permeable Cloister* by explaining the distinction of convents from their male counterpart, the monastery. "Convents, however, were spiritually distinct institutions in that they were also intended to be enclosed spaces that protected female virginity and chastity, two qualities that represented the feminine ideal in Spanish society, whether secular or religious (16)." The previously unmarried were protected in terms of virginity and the unmarried women who were separated from the men who caused them ill were protected in terms of chastity. In the case of literary female characters who had been violated and robbed of their honor and abandoned by the men who once pursued them, these women were able to regain the societal respect they had lost as dishonored noblewomen through pursuit of a devout spiritual life in the convent.

The protection provided by the convent was not only available to those who took the veil and became nuns. Doña Lisis of the frame story in the *Desengaños* is an example of such a woman. After hearing the many tragedies experienced by women in the secular world, she retreated to the protection of the convent in order to avoid such tragedy in her own life yet did not take the veil.

Lehfeldt discusses the function and opportunity for secular women in the convent indicating that “some of these women were widows who wanted to live a pious life removed from the temporal world without wishing to make a formal profession. Others are not identified as widows and may have sought the safe haven and social sanction that convents provided” (42). Lehfeldt indicates that the role of the convent as a refuge and shelter for women is portrayed not only in the work of writers such as María de Zayas but also in historical sources.

There were numerous historical reasons for women to enter into the convent. Convent life was a safe haven for one group of females living in the convent which was the unmarried daughters from noble families. Entrance into the convent was rarely a personal decision for these young women. Like their inability to choose a husband, this decision was one that was made by the male head of household (Ortega López 269). The convent was an alternative for male head of households to send the women of their family for whom they could not afford a suitable marriage dowry but for whom a certain amount of money and status would be awarded to the convent for her safe keeping. For some men, sending a daughter or sister to a convent was an economic reality or a business decision. When a suitable marriage was not available or practical, the convent was the alternative. Sánchez Loras explains the choice of the convent for daughters in a family of multiple daughters in *Mujeres, conventos, y formas de la religiosidad barroca*.

Fue el desequilibrio, en el seno de muchas familias, entre las aspiraciones de honor y estatus a través de matrimonios provechosos o, al menos, no desmerecedores, y las posibilidades económicas capaces de culminar tales aspiraciones. De aquí resultó la práctica de, caso de tener varias hijas, casar a una, dotándola en cuantía que no desdiga del yerno al que aspira. El resto de las hijas pasarían a la vida religiosa en conventos que, asegurando un vivir honorable (siempre fue honorable la vida del claustro), exigían dotes

menores que las que serían necesarias para asegurar similar rango vida matrimonial (140).

Families with more than one daughter could not always afford the expensive marriage dowries required for a suitable marriage for each daughter. Through sending some of these daughters to the convent, they were able to retain their high social and economic status as a family in a more affordable manner than by paying the various dowries for the marriage of several daughters or sisters. While entrance into a convent also required a dowry, the payment was considerably smaller than that of matrimony (Ortega López 269). Since women were not responsible for the economic resources in the family, the decision between paying for the convent or marriage dowry fell upon the male head of household.

Not all girls and women were pleased with the arrangements for them to either marry or to be committed to convent life. Even though the ceremony of becoming a nun required the woman to profess her voluntary entrance in the convent (Lehfeltdt 175) historians do not know how many of those professions were truly voluntary (Sánchez Lora 143) since it was the male's decision that she enter the convent.

The male authority figure's role in making decisions for noblewomen indicates the involuntary manner in which many women may have entered the convent. In contrast, Zayas' writings portray a few rare exceptions to making these choices. In these fictional cases the female characters truly did enter the convent of their own accord and did not do so because a male authority figure demanded it of them. In these unusual fictional cases, the tremendous importance of social and financial status during the time period is laid out for readers.

Doña Lisis of the frame story is an example of a female's voluntary entrance into the convent. The narrator of the story does not reveal the existence of a male authority figure so in accordance with historical evidence; the convent would be the most beneficial option for a woman like Lisis. The convent would be the best manner to maintain her status as a chaste noblewoman who does not wish to marry or who is unsuitable for marriage (Merrim 103). From a historical standpoint her lack of a male authority figure could restrain her capability to marry or choose the convent since it is he who normally would administer financial assistance for either purpose. However, Doña Lisis is capable of entering the convent because she personally has the financial means to pay the dowry and does so of her own accord in the absence of a father figure.

While historically women were not considered capable of making decisions that affected them socially or economically, the case of a literary figure like Doña Lisis who entered the convent by her own determination had the power to do so because of her wealthy status and absence of a male authority figure. Her nobility, despite the lack of a male authority figure, allowed her to pay her way into the convent and provide financial support for the institution. Zayas indicates in the character of Doña Lisis the potential of a noblewoman to make her own independent decisions when a male authority figure is not present. This element in her works corresponds with her constant theme of the defense of women.

In *Estragos que causa el vicio* Doña Florentina also finds herself alone and socially unimportant due to the loss of her honor and the absence of a male authority figure. She consults Don Gaspar, the man responsible for saving her life, and together they decide her best option is to enter the convent. Because of the money left to her as the only surviving member of the family, this is a possibility. In these fictional literary instances, Zayas demonstrates the importance of financial means when entering the convent. While a noblewoman making a

personal decision to enter the convent was historically unlikely (Sánchez Lora 143), her texts allude to the importance of the appropriate financial means in the event that it did occur. Just as in the outside world, worth in the convent was measured by social status. These women would enjoy the benefits of their nobility in the convent but they were required to pay their fair share. For those who entered the convent as widows or as unmarried women who could no longer live in the secular world because they had lost the honor and were without a male authority figure, they had lost their social and economic worth. By utilizing their financial resources as leverage, however, they could regain the benefits by securing a safe environment in which they retained their status of being a daughter with a specific social estate and noble lineage as well as retaining a level of autonomy in doing so.

Another group of women that often entered the convent were widows. Even though their situation was circumstantial and not under their control, as unguarded women they were still considered suspicious in the eyes of society (Sánchez Lora 148). Widows were women without heads of household and were a potential for temptation and perdition. They had to be controlled. Therefore, in the event of their husband's death, socially acceptable options for these women were either remarriage or entrance in the convent. Were she to re-marry, all property she may have acquired after her husband's death would be transferred to her new husband. Many widows decided on the option of the convent instead (Lehfeldt 42). In fact, widowhood was often one of the few opportunities for independence in a woman's life in which they were finally in control of their property and assets (27). This sense of autonomy, though limited, that was experienced by widows provides an indication of the potential for life somewhat free from the control of a male authority figure. By entering the convent instead of remarrying, they were more able to pursue their spiritual well-being and a life that was less burdened from mundane obligations required of

them under the direct control of a mortal male. Women who chose to profess had only to follow Christ whose requirements were spiritual and related to the mundane world through prayer and good works.

Zayas shows the example of a widow's entrance into the convent with the character of Doña Laura, the mother of Doña Lisis, a widow who joins her daughter in the convent as well as the mother of Doña Isabel, another widow who joins her daughter in the convent. These widows can find solace in the conviviality of convent life without the social constraints of a future marriage.

Another group of women frequently found in the convent were secular women. Since women living alone in the outside world were socially unacceptable (Sánchez Lora 139) these women sought solace within the walls of the convent. Lehfeldt states that while not widows they "may have sought the safe haven and social sanction that convents provided" (42). Though the existence of secular women living in these religious institutions was looked down upon by society outside of the convent, within it these women's existence was easily incorporated into daily life in the convent. They paid rent and all other expenses necessary for the upkeep of the convent as their residence (Lehfeldt 42). These women served the convent community very similarly to nuns, normally observing the same religious values and ideals (Lehfeldt 151) yet had the freedom to come and go as they pleased. Their ability to do so was under constant scrutiny by society (Lehfeldt 150) because of their lack of male supervision. Nevertheless, the existence of these women show that in the convent, women were not necessarily as closed off from the outside world as might have been expected. This option made it possible for women who did not wish to profess or who were unable financially or spiritually to commit to the religious profession to still fulfill the pious and virtuous societal expectations of women of the time

period. The reality of secular women in the convent portrays the opportunity that women may have had for a somewhat autonomous life apart from one controlled by a male authority figure, yet still meet the high expectations set forth by society.

In order to meet the societal ideals of womanhood, the extent to which women were enclosed from the outside world was an important one. Essentially, women in the convent were treated similarly to married laywomen in the household, constantly enclosed in order to protect their purity and honor (Lehfeldt 147). Yet as representatives of the Catholic religion, their piousness and chastity were even more important. Lehfeldt describes the expectations of the convent and its enclosure of the women living within it: “If nuns, who embodied the highly revered social and spiritual ideal of chastity, were faltering at all in their observance of it, then the kingdom was disordered. Any inability to control their activity might be interpreted as a reflection of greater fissures in the preservation of the social order (148).” Since keeping control of women in the outside world was a matter of keeping a fragile society together, it was even more important to maintain order within society’s religious institutions. While not living under the close scrutiny and control of a father, brother, or husband, nuns were still closely monitored and expectations of their behavior were restrictive and clearly laid out. Lehfeldt describes the many prohibited activities and the expectations concerning the behavior of nuns. They were advised as follows.

Loathe anything that could taint or bring infamy to their perfect chastity. They should never leave the convent, see a man (with the possible and carefully monitored exception of a relative): lean out a window, receive a letter, look at themselves in the mirror, touch their bodies, raise puppies or kittens; see a rooster or hen or anything that could have sexual intercourse, be alone, sing secular songs, wear luxurious garments, sleep on soft



beds, or be idle. The nuns were, in short, to avoid all contact with sensual pleasures or the suggestion of sexuality (147).

Though extreme, these expectations are a clear portrayal of the constraint that was expected of nuns within the convent. Despite the lack of a direct male authority figure, life in the convent was not one that was free of rules and expectations. Many of the regulations expected of women in the household still pertained to life within the convent. Angela Muñoz further explores this idea in her book *Acciones y intenciones de Mujeres en la vida religiosa de los siglos XV y XVI* yet she articulates that, while under close scrutiny of higher societal powers in the convent, they were also allowed to develop some element of freedom for themselves.

La historia de los conventos femeninos nos entreabre numerosas ventanas a la interioridad de unas instituciones tuteladas por los poderes fuertes de cada momento, eclesiásticos y seculares, que presenciaron, por tanto, actos de control hacia las mujeres, pero también algunas de las prácticas de libertad que estas desarrollaron (15).

This possibility for a sense of freedom in the convent meant they had access to privileges not available to those women outside the convent. Convents functioned similarly to large estates of which the male head of household would normally be responsible. Evidence of the similarity between a large noble household and a convent is portrayed in the role of the Convent's Abbess described by Lehfeldt. "Various trappings of authority underlined the seriousness of the abbess' responsibility. She took an oath of office, pledging to protect the community and answer to her superiors" (59). And, of course, the abbess could exercise considerable political and economic power since "In a convent with a large estate, election as abbess could mean considerable power"

(58). These descriptions of an Abbess' duties as depicted by Lehfeldt are comparable to those of a male head of household at a large estate.

Convents, like large estates, also had financial obligations to tend to and bookkeeping responsibilities. Despite the important leadership role of the Abbess, she was not the only individual who dealt with those duties. She was responsible for the delegation of various management and bookkeeping skills to other nuns in the cloister. These responsibilities meant access to knowledge not commonly available to women in the outside society (57). Since the responsibilities of women in the outside world pertained primarily to the household, it was the male of the household who learned the skills pertaining to finances and bookkeeping. Therefore, life in the convent often required women to be engaged in duties otherwise reserved for men in the public sphere.

Knowledge of certain political and economic processes also taught these women in leadership roles in the convent how to assert a power not associated with their gender in the outside world. Due to their function as social institutions in which entry required a contract and a dowry of their nuns, many convents were maintained through considerably large financial savings and patrimonies. Rights to these finances often resulted in legal conflicts concerning payments of dowries and other financial obligations between convents and the families of the nuns living there (Lehfeldt 82). The knowledge gained through running such an institution provided them with the means to defend themselves. Their fiscal and bookkeeping duties equipped them with legal knowledge to defend their financial interests in such conflicts with secular families and institutions. While the outcomes of these legal battles were not always beneficial for the convent, they nonetheless provided the means for the women in convents to affirm a sense of power and position in society (83). Since legal knowledge was not readily

accessible to secular women, these conflicts indicate that women in the convent were provided with the means to assert themselves in a manner that would not have been a possibility outside of the convent.

Not only did noblewomen have access to an authoritative position that they would not have in the outside world as a daughter or wife, but they also were able to maintain the privileges and luxuries associated with their higher social status in secular society. According to Lisa Vollendorf in her book *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain*, the hierarchy of the outside world existed within the convent as well. Women of financial means often had the privilege of bringing in slaves or servants and also of having visitors come in from the outside world (94). Vollendorf also describes the potential for noblewomen's independence in the convent through a quotation of Stacey Schlauf. "Religious life enabled some (mostly elite) early modern women, including those of Spain and Spanish America, to achieve a certain amount of freedom, within significant limits" (94). While life in the convent still had its limits as did life in the secular world, it also presented a slightly elevated level of independence.

An example of this autonomy and access to the outside world is seen in the character of Doña Lisis in the frame story of *Desengaños*. Zayas' narrative states, after telling of Lisis' final decision to enter the convent instead of marriage is not a tragic one since Lisis is not rejected by society nor is she a societal "throw-away." She has made a happy choice by determining not to be subject to any one suitor.

No es trágico fin, sino el más felice que se pudo dar, pues codiciosa y deseada de muchos, no se sujetó a ninguno. Si os duran los deseos de verla, buscadla con intento casto, que con ello la hallareis tan vuestra y con la voluntad tan firme y honesta, como tiene

prometido, y tan servidora vuestra como siempre, y como vos merecéis; que hasta en conocerlo ninguna le hace ventaja (Yllera 510).

This citation indicates two ideas which are reinforced by historical evidence. First, that as a noblewoman she must have had the privilege of receiving visitors since the narrator encourages those who wish to see her to visit her in the convent. The second is that she entered of her own accord and did not subject herself to any suitor which is explicitly stated and suggests that she may have had the opportunity to marry with financial funds that were available but decided against it. While her motives to enter the convent may have been influenced by a man, she still made the individual choice as a woman to not subject herself to a suitor or husband and to remain honest and pure. The “certain sense of freedom” experienced by noblewomen in the convent as described by Schlauf is portrayed in the fictional character of Doña Lisis.

According to Lehfeltdt, women’s access to secular society was furthered through their spiritual duties as nuns. These women were entrusted with the crucial responsibility of praying for the salvation and spiritual health of secular society (Lehfeltdt 16). The duties associated with this responsibility included providing spiritual guidance and often mentoring family members, meaning that communication with the outside world still existed after her entrance into the convent. Lehfeltdt describes the familial ties that remained intact after a daughter entered the convent as both financial and spiritual.

The entrance of a female relative into a convent did not lead to a severing of ties with her natal family. Through acts of patronage and the ongoing payment of various sums designated for the financial support of these professed women, families remained inextricably tied to these nuns. As a consequence, families frequently transgressed the

boundaries of the cloister seeking the conversation and spiritual advice of their female relatives (39).

Thus, entering the convent was not only a means for maintaining social status but also a means for spiritual advancement for both the individual in the convent as well as her family. Occasionally, spiritual advice and guidance extended outside of the convent and nuns were summoned to visit prominent women in the community to provide further spiritual instruction (Lehfelddt 41). Through their religious responsibilities within the convent, these women were able to maintain ties with families as well as exercise influence beyond the matrimonial, domestic, and maternal duties they would face in the outside world.

Nun's spiritual duties were observed through conversation and counsel to those outside of the convent, but they also had other opportunities to claim a level of authority not available to women in the secular world. These opportunities were born of the level of education provided in the convents. Since many noble and wealthy families sent their daughters to the convent for the sole reason of educating her, enclosure in the convent meant ready access to educational pursuits that were not as easily available in the enclosure of the household. Vollendorf explains in *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain*:

We have ample evidence to prove that convents provided continuity among generations for educated women. Formally and informally, these institutions gave women access to the activism and intellectualism of other nuns, saints, and martyrs. The women who gained an education outside convent walls did so in spite of the mandate to provide women with only enough education to make them good wives—certainly not good scholars, activists and writers (169).”

For nuns, unlike women in the secular world, education was validated and even expected. They were to use this education and ability to read and write to promote the spiritual life and serve the Lord as “brides of Christ” (Vollendorf 173). A sense of self worth as women was sometimes portrayed in their writing. Vollendorf establishes that they often “infused their texts with a sense of confidence and investment in women’s endeavors (97).” Through defending their capabilities as women despite societal beliefs in their writing we see the element of freedom and autonomy available to them in the convent. Though still living under the power and authority of male religious authorities and the church, through their responsibilities as spiritual guides and the many intellectual opportunities available to them, they often reached a level of autonomy not found in the outside world (Vollendorf 119).

The sense of female independence that developed through education has been indicated in the works written by women in the convent during the time period. The wide variety of convent literature from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has provided historians with a thorough depiction of a supportive and female centric convent culture. One common element in the literature produced in convents during the time period is that of the female network and community. Such themes expose the extent to which the convent came to be a network of women reaching out to each other.

Vollendorf describes the supportive relationships formed in the convent between nuns as revealed in convent writing. “While priests enjoyed influence and prestige, women’s religious writing confirms that nuns looked to each other for the nuts-and-bolts details about convent spirituality and domesticity. For many, to be a nun was to be both a teacher and a learner” (Vollendorf 179). This statement reveals the solidarity between the women in the convent. Their

religious duties served as means to create a network of knowledge and wisdom on their spiritual path through sharing their own insight and accepting that of other women in the convent.

The support offered between women in the convents along with the female-centered themes often found in convent writing reveal that there existed a level of intellectuality and self-confidence as women that enabled them to write on controversial themes not unlike the defense of women commonly found in María de Zayas. Two specific historic examples of writers who promote these themes as stated by Vollendorf are Sor Violante do Ceo and Sor Marcela de San Felix. Sor Violante, using economic metaphors in her poetry, “Devalues men’s public activity while privileging female intimacy (Vollendorf 99).” Sor Marcela wrote a play describing the journey of a nun in her profession in which “Female characters bond to conquer vice and sin. Cooperation and mutuality lie at the heart of all the plays (Vollendorf 100).”

Convent literature often also included the mistreatment of women in the misogynous culture of Spain at the time. Ana Abarca de Bolea is an example of the defense of women found in convent literature. “In the novellas, the female characters clearly are mistreated and held to higher standards than the male characters....By embedding excessively denigrating representations of women into recognizably traditional novellas; Abarca draws attention to the negative treatment of women in dominant literary tradition (Vollendorf 108).” Due to the expectation of women in the secular world to remain silent and obedient towards their male authority figure and their strict enclosure in the household (Sánchez Lora 50), such forms of expression most likely would not have been tolerated for women outside the convent. The controversial and female centered themes found in convent texts are evidence of the autonomy and self-worth cultivated by the female solidarity of convent culture.

The spiritual support network among nuns contributed to a strong sense of female community in the convent, sometimes resulting in a “home away from home (Lehfeltdt 43)”. Since many convents had female founders, they tended to function as “uniquely female spaces” attracting not just one daughter from a family but numerous female family members (Lehfeltdt 43). Literary evidence of numerous family members entering the same convent can be seen in the frame story of the *Desengaños amorosos*. Doña Lisis and Doña Isabel both entered the convent at which Lisis’ cousin Doña Estefanía had already been living. Shortly thereafter, they are followed by their mothers.

Unlike the bonding relationships pursued in the convent, the female friendships and relationships outside of the convent are often conflict forming. Such is the case of Doña Isabel, whose friendship with her suitor’s sister is torn apart when he falls ill because of her rejections. The case is similarly unfavorable for Doña Inés, whose sister-in-law contributes to her unjust punishment and for Doña Florentina who falls in love with her brother-in-law and is ultimately responsible for her sister’s death. Through these women and their situations, Zayas implies that female relationships that are harmful outside of the convent become possible inside of it. As both convent literature and the work of Zayas portray, a supportive and exclusively female community was often formed within the convent walls that may have been difficult to encounter in the secular world.

The solidarity and community created in these convents may have had to do with the close quarters in which these women lived, carefully shielded from the outside world. Since guarding their chastity and purity was always of utmost importance, the level of enclosure they experienced within the convent was a constant concern not only of the convent itself but of the outside world. Lehfeltdt asserts that “If nuns, who embodied the highly revered social and



spiritual ideal of chastity were faltering at all in their observance of it, then the kingdom was disordered. Any inability to control their activity might be interpreted as a reflection of greater fissures in the preservation of the social order” (148). Like noblewomen in the household, the preservation of their honor and virginity remained their most important value and also the key to maintaining social order. The intentions behind enclosure in the convent were very similar to what secular women experienced within the household (Lehfeltdt 147). However, for women in the convent the purpose of enclosure was twofold. In addition to maintaining their honor, according to Gillian Ahlgren in her book *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, strict enclosure also created a space more conducive to their spiritual duties of reflection and prayer as decided in the Council of Trent (168). For the women of the *Desengaños Amorosos*, this meant they would have the opportunity to serve God, and therefore regain societal value and respect, more effectively without the distraction and temptation they encountered in the secular world.

Historically, the idea of enclosure served not only a social function, to preserve these women’s honor and promote spiritual growth, but also a personal function. Lehfeltdt describes the role that enclosure from the outside world played for the spirituality of nuns.

A careful analysis of the meaning of enclosure in the lives of female religious during the Tridentine era reveals its ability to be a source of strength and identity. It allowed them to identify with the church’s ideals. In 1567 when the general of the Carmelite order visited the convent of La Encarnación in Avila... he found that some nuns in the community chose enclosure though it was not required by their vows and that they wished others in the community would do the same (182).

This example indicates the autonomous manner in which many women in the convent were able to develop apart from the careful supervision of a male. In this case, the distance created between themselves and the outside world allowed them to do so. Likewise, the enclosure of the convent would allow the women of the *Desengaños amorosos* to strengthen themselves as individuals and to mend after having been emotionally, socially, and physically damaged by the secular world.

Despite restrictive enclosure practices, nuns were not always completely closed off from the outside world and the dangers accompanied by it. Just as secular women faced dangers when attending church due to their exposure to unrelated men (Ortega López 280), women in the convent also faced the hazards of gallantry. Marcelin Deforneaux describes this phenomenon in *Daily Life in Spain in the Golden Age*.

Galanteo de monjas, the art of paying court to the nuns, would appear to be incredible if there were not so much written evidence about it...Far from being shocked, many nuns enjoyed this game and the fact of having a gallant was considered almost as natural as it was for a young girl in those days to have a recognized fiancé (110).

While this citation indicates that some nuns enjoyed this attention, the immense importance placed on a woman's honor indicates the dangers associated with this type of contact with the opposite sex unless the suitor was an approved one by parents or relatives. Galanteo de monjas also portrays the state to which women were actually closed off and protected from the outside world. While strict enclosure was the ideal as created by the Council of Trent's decree of 1563 (Lehfeldt 145), it was not always observed. Male distractions still existed within the convent as they did outside of the convent. In the secular world fictionalized by Zayas, her characters clearly demonstrate the danger that comes from contact with unrelated men. Intended and

unintended relationships in the secular world damaged her characters that often entered the convent. The utilization of the convent may have been a means to promote women being more capable of dealing with such temptation. Due to the sense of self-confidence and the emphasis on their obligation as spiritual counselors, these women may have been more capable of dealing with these worldly distractions.

The role of the convent in Spanish sixteenth and seventeenth century society was extremely important because the convent was a place where women could escape many of the social dangers. It was, for those families who could afford it, a means to provide a safe haven for female relatives who, for whatever reason, could not serve her community as a married woman. The convent played an important role as an educational center for the women within it and a spiritual service provider for some outside the convent community. While still a restrictive and enclosed atmosphere similar to that of the noblewomen enclosed in the household, the culture of the convent provided many opportunities that were not readily available to noblewomen in the secular environment.

These women were able to learn the duties of maintaining a large institution and the bookkeeping and financial skills that went along with it. They were entrusted with the crucial duty of praying for the salvation of society and providing spiritual guidance to those in the secular environment. This often meant a level of mobilization in the public sphere not often associated with the enclosure of convents. In addition to the abilities necessary for maintaining the convent's financial and institutional well-being, they were often educated to a level much higher than noblewomen outside of the convent typically were. This meant women in the convent produced a good amount of the literature written by women during the time period (Vollendorf 57). These texts reveal the convent culture that functioned as communities of women

committed to providing companionship and assistance to each other and the outside world. They also reveal the extent to which women in the convent were able to assert a certain sense of autonomy and self-worth which is portrayed in the common theme of the defense of women found not only in convent literature but also in the secular writings of María de Zayas. According to the historical evidence of life for women within the convent, the function of the convent in the *Desengaños amorosos* may have meant much more than simply being the only socially acceptable home for dishonored noblewomen.

### Chapter Three: The Literary Use of the Convent to Meet Social Expectations while Promoting Women's Independence

There is pervasive historical and literary evidence from sixteenth and seventeenth century historical accounts and literary productions to indicate that Spanish noble women, like those portrayed in the *Desengaños amorosos*, lived constantly under the influence of men and their desires. This evidence shows that these women had few opportunities to express their own ideas, desires and decisions. María de Zayas was one of few secular women whose works were published. Vollendorf suggests that published works by secular women writers in the Spanish Golden Age of literary production were few and that the lack of publications by women writers at the time is an example of subordination. Only a few secular women writers were published before 1700 in Spain (Vollendorf 57). One of these writers was María de Zayas y Sotomayor. Zayas was born to noble parents in Madrid in 1590. Her nobility meant she was able to dedicate herself to learning and to literature (Vasileski 11) since it was only those women of noble status who enjoyed the possibility of education beyond the responsibilities of the household (Ortega López 292). Not only did María de Zayas benefit from the rare opportunity to be published as a woman, but she became a prominent and respected author of the time despite being a woman and therefore less likely to be accepted as a writer. Vasileski describes the tremendous success of her novels in *María de Zayas y Sotomayor: Su Época y Su Obra*, revealing that the only authors who managed to have more editions of their work were possibly Miguel de Cervantes, Mateo Aleman and Francisco de Quevedo, three prominent male authors who were her contemporaries:

Las novelas de María de Zayas alcanzaron un éxito extraordinario, Con la excepción de Cervantes, de Alemán, y de Quevedo, no hubo acaso ningún otro autor de libros de pasatiempo cuyas obras lograsen tantas ediciones como los suyos (43).

Additionally, Vasileski points out the prominence and respect that Zayas established which she indicates in her own writing.

Aparece entre los preliminares de las novelas amorosas y ejemplares: “La señora Doña María de Zayas, gloria de Manzanares y honra de nuestra España (a quien las doctas academias de Madrid tanto han aplaudido y celebrado).” (13).

This excerpt from *Las novelas ejemplares* by María de Zayas indicates that, as a prominent author, she must have received a fair amount of praise and respect, allowing her to address issues that, from a lesser known, unpublished female writer, might have been condemned or ignored.

The issues that María de Zayas brought to light in her *Desengaños amorosos* centered on what many might consider the mistreatment of women emphasized through the tragic experiences of her female characters. She encouraged the need for change by setting up a frame story that encouraged young women to seek safety in the convent instead of risking dishonor in the public sphere. Her themes highlight the challenges of following a rather strict code of honor that haunted both men and women (in fiction and in history) in terms of the preservation of the code. Several other female authors wrote works that examined and revealed the competence and underestimated powers of women (both in a positive spiritual and loving sense and a negative conniving sense).

Lisa Vollendorf discusses the role that the writing of María de Zayas and two other prominent female writers of the time period, Angela de Azevedo, and Ana Caro de Mallen had on the seventeenth century society’s perception of women in her book “The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain”.

Through their texts, the authors introduced audiences to imaginary worlds in which women's concerns were treated as valid and women's desires received as much attention as men's. They offered up nuanced, expansive representations of female friendship and desire. The similarities among the tantalizing, even daring, depictions of gender and sexuality point to numerous possibilities—of the existence of intelligible female homoerotic codes and of a collective protest against misogyny and social control—that have yet to be studied fully. (88)

Yet even as a prominent and respected author, Zayas' method of writing about such issues was limited since she was female and still considered the inferior sex by society. She provided a voice for the thorny issues that a restrictive society created. She addressed controversial issues in a manner that did not challenge the delicate structure and sexual hierarchy of Spanish Golden Age society which meant self-recognition of her supposed female "intellectual inferiority". Vollendorf describes the manner in which María de Zayas disclaims her writing capabilities in her work.

Zayas adopts a self denigrating pose when she introduces her stylistically complex volume of ten novellas as her "scribbles". She then defends women's intellectual capacities and criticizes men for denying women the education they deserve. In recognition of the challenge she faces, Zayas retreats at the end of the preface, claiming that since she was born a woman she has no obligation to write well. (59)

This quote indicates the extent to which Zayas writing was carefully designed to meet the standards set forth by society yet still introduce her radical ideas concerning the defense of women. History proved her to be successful.

The role of the convent is a further way for her to promote societal expectations of women in her writing. However, her use of the convent also cleverly asserts her power as a prominent writer to produce social change by suggesting that it is preferable to seek seclusion in a convent than to put up with the dangers and deceptions of the secular environment. Her utilization of the convent as the alternative life for women serves a social function by encouraging women to enter into the life that best exemplifies the expectations set forth by society. Yet the convent as the ultimate home for the women of her novels also functions as a means of promoting a life for women that will set them on the path to self sufficiency, therefore slowly changing the views set forth by society.

The convent serves as a safe haven for women in a particularly restrictive time period in Spain's history, protecting them from their so-called naturally evil tendencies in the eyes of a patriarchal society that was driven by a noble code of honor. Nevertheless, the convent might also be a carefully disguised birthplace for empowered and independent women in a harsh and misogynous society. As history has indicated, the many opportunities presented them in the convent provided a safe haven, a place where women could receive education and serve their community.

Zayas' use of the convent may have had more meaning than simply allowing women to live up to the standards expected of them. It was also perhaps the safest place for them. Since women were expected to always live under the tutelage of some male authority figure in order to protect them and their honor (Sánchez Lora 51), being an unmarried woman was not the safest atmosphere for secular women to be living. Zayas lived during a time of civil and economic unrest in Spain. The conditions of the public sphere were in shambles which meant that in many



cases, the convent may indeed have been the best option for women from the family's and society's viewpoint.

The convent provided the protection necessary for women which was not always available outside of it. Many of the country's men had enlisted in the military or left to encounter a more prosperous life in the "new world" (Vasileski 17). The issue of absent husbands or authority figures for women was a grave one as they then had no "male protection". The absence of many suitable noblemen also could have meant fewer options for a male authority figure to find women a suitable partner for marriage as expected by society and the social estate to which the woman belonged. In this case, María de Zayas may have advocated the convent as a way to deal with the social problem of men who were continuously leaving their homes, their communities and their country for economic and political purposes. The safe haven of the convent avoided damaging encounters in the lives of women who were for a variety of reasons "alone."

Readers see a reflection of the societal issue of absent husbands and their effect on women in Zayas' *La Inocencia Castigada* in which Doña Inés' husband is often gone due to business travel. During his absence, she freely leaves the confines of the house and exposes herself to the outside world. In so doing, Don Diego becomes enamored of her and places a curse on her, deceiving her into unconsciously visiting him in his home at night and therefore losing her honor. Here Zayas' highlights a common problem of the historical time period, absent husbands, and displays its potentially disastrous outcomes for the abandoned wives. By placing Doña Inés in the cloister at the end of the story, the narrative promotes the convent as a means to deal with the historically frequent social issue of absent male authority figures.

While many men were leaving to fight wars outside of the country, there were also wars and civil unrest within the country. In 1640, seven years before the first publishing of the *Desengaños Amorosos*, a severe uprising occurred in Cataluña against the French. Zayas alludes to this uprising in *La esclava de su amante*. Doña Isabel's family moves to Zaragoza in light of the hazardous living conditions in their home in Cataluña. In Zaragoza Doña Isabel and her family must live with the family of their landlord, a wealthy widow. The widow's son, Don Manuel, is the man responsible for the loss her honor and ultimately leads her to disguise herself as a slave and pursue him in the hopes that he will finally marry her, the only way to regain her honor while remaining in the secular world. Were it not for the unrest in her birth city, she would never have found herself in such grave circumstances. Eventually she enters the convent as a means to restore her function in society through spiritual endeavor and lives her days in the safety of the convent. Here, Zayas utilizes the convent as a safe haven for women who no longer possess their honor, clearly the best option in a society whose value rests in the honor of its noblewomen. Zayas also suggests with the outcomes of these novellas that the convent served as legitimate protection from the civil unrest and instability of the country and its effect on the lives of many noble families.

For the contemporaries of María de Zayas a woman's most valuable treasure was her reputation in society and her value as a marriageable woman. The convent served as a means of enclosing women from the outside world thus protecting them from the devastating possibility of losing that honor and tarnishing her family's reputation. In fact, the convent was seen as superior to marriage as described by Ortega Lopez in *Historia de las mujeres en España*. While marriage was the most commonly utilized path for women in Spanish society, the convent represented the

ideal manner for women to live their lives, since it was designed specifically to maintain the spiritual purity and chastity so important for women.

Aunque el matrimonio fue el estado más habitual de la población, reservado solo a los laicos, siguió ocupando un lugar secundario en la concepción eclesiástica, tras un deseable estado de virginidad concebido como el estado perfecto (266).

While many of the women in the *novellas* of Zayas lost their virginity and therefore the family's honor before entering into the convent, it is important to note that their harmful interactions with men were the motivating factor in leading them to a life in the convent. Exposure to men in the outside world meant constant danger of losing their honor as Zayas portrays in each *Desengaños*. Throughout each story the reader can see the way in which the convent serves to counteract the harmful effects of the outside world. Zayas writing demonstrates that the best place to control female chastity, an extremely important societal ideal, is within the convent walls.

The ideal woman, then, could be “developed” within the convent in accordance with societal ideals as women there were educated in Christian virtue and spirituality. They were also prepared to work with the regular functions of the convent. Historically, the religious duties of women were emphasized both within and outside of the convent but their responsibilities in the religious community indicate the strong value that Spanish society placed upon spirituality and religious ideals for women. Zayas constantly portrays the spiritual ideal obtained through life in the convent through serving God, the divine husband. Doña Isabel, of *Esclava de su amante* and the frame story, describes her reasons for entering the convent as the better option when considering between an arranged matrimony that could lead to evil and strife and the convent life

whose very nature was the pursuit of good and the divine. Isabel indicates her reasons for choosing to be a servant or slave of God instead of a slave to a common man in the following quotation:

Pues por un ingrato y desconocido amante he pasado tantas desdichas, y siempre con los hierros y nombre de su Esclava, ¿Cuanto mejor es serlo de dios, y a El Ofrecerme con el mismo nombre de la Esclava de su Amante? (Ylerra 167).

Isabel indicates that, because of the tragedies brought about by her experience with males in the secular world, the ideal option for her is to be subjected not to a worldly husband, but the divine husband.

Furthermore, each of Zayas' characters that enter the convent is associated with saintliness and virtuosity, despite her *sinful* past. The convent life of Doña Inés of *La inocencia castigada* is compared to that of a saint. "Donde hoy vive haciendo vida de una santa, afirmándome a quien la vio cuando la sacaron de la pared, y después, que es de las más hermosas mujeres que hay en el reino del Andalucía." Despite her tragic past and the loss of her honor, she regained her womanly and spiritual virtues through her life in the convent and retained her God-given beauty, an indication of her goodness and saintliness.

Saint-like lifestyle is also used to describe Doña Florentina of *Estragos que causa el vicio*. She gains forgiveness and permission for entry into the convent after being driven to commit adultery with her sister's husband. In the secular context, she cannot avoid the dangers of passion. In the convent, however, like Doña Inés, she lives the virtuous and holy life expected of all women in the convent. In this case, Florentina was able to follow her desires since her desires coincided with a divine purpose: "Se consiguió su deseo, entrándose religiosa en uno de

los mas suntuosos conventos de Lisboa....donde hoy vive santa y religiosísima vida” (Yllera 288).

The use of religious terms in the brief descriptions of these women’s lives in the convent following the loss of their honor serves to meet societal ideals. In the previous cases, Zayas utilizes the convent to portray to society the ability of such an institution to restore the societal value of these disgraced women through the saintly duties and responsibilities which they assumed in the convent. Without the convent space as a refuge from their mistakes, they would cause irreparable harm to their self, family, community and to the greater Spanish society that so depended upon the honor of women to maintain itself.

Society viewed the convent as a means to confine women to an enclosed space and separate them from the harmful temptations of the outside world. However, even while utilizing the convent to reinforce that idea as a means to be accepted as a woman writer, Zayas also advocated consistently the necessity for women to stand up against these powerful societal and masculine forces that proved to be extreme. The first indication of her works as a means to defend women is the purpose of the *sarao* where the disenchantments were being told. The narrative states the rules around which Lisis organized her gathering.

Que los que refiriesen fuesen casos verdaderos, y que tuviesen nombre de desengaños (en esto no sé si los satisfizo, porque como ellos procuran siempre engañarlas, sienten mucho se desengañen). Fue la pretensión de Lisis en esto volver por la fama de las mujeres (tan postrada y abatida por su mal juicio, que apenas hay quien hable bien de ellas)” (Yllera 118).

This statement clearly indicates the purpose of the stories not solely as a means to satisfy societal expectations, as society was controlled by men and these stories served to defend women in a world that constantly reflected badly upon them. Zayas even went so far as to reprimand men for their treatment of women in *Amar solo para vencer*.

Y que, ya que las hacéis malas y estudiáis astucias para que lo sean, ocasionando sus desdichas, deshonoras y muertes. ¡Que gustéis de castigarlas con las obras y afrentarlas con las palabras!! Y que no os corráis de que sea así! Decid bien de ellas, y ya os perdonaremos el mal que las hacéis (Yllera 334).

Here Zayas clearly indicates her belief that it is due to men's misgivings and treatment, that women such as these are lured into such terrible fates. And in order to combat this treatment, she encourages women to come together and fight for defense of their rights and good name. "Ea Dejemos las galas, rosas y rizos, y volvamos por nosotras; unas, con el entendimiento, y otras, con las armas! Y será el mejor desengaño para las que hoy son y las que han de venir" (Yllera 231). In the eyes of society, the convent may have been the one socially acceptable option for many of the women in these stories due to their personal dishonor at the hands of shameful men. Since some dishonorable men prove to be *unreliable* in terms of their social obligations to women, Zayas demonstrates women's need to fend for themselves apart from the power of the men in their lives who are often responsible for their misfortunes. The narrator's statement to her audience at the *sarao* is telling: "Pues, señoras, desengañémonos; volvamos por nuestra opinión; mueran los hombres en nuestras memorias, pues mas obligadas que a ellas estamos a nosotras mismas" (Yllera 222). She implores her audience to remove the illusion from their thoughts and begs her female audience to see things as they are and not as public opinion or the social code would suggest things were. She calls for women to rid themselves of illusion because they

“know” better since they have lived and experienced the painful and miserable reality that was “sold” to them initially as an illusion. She calls women to unite with her words “volvamos por nuestra opinión.” Here, she states that a unified voice counts and her words draw the listener/reader to agree as one of many. As a means to liberate those who experience the painful memories of deception by men she offers, “mueran los hombres en nuestras memorias, pues mas obligadas que a ellas estamos a nosotras mismas”. With these words she implores women to let these men who abused them die in their memories because these women owe more to themselves than to these terrible memories that have haunted them.

Zayas promotes self-awareness and forgiveness of self. Since these women cannot be cleared of the damage done to them, they can only clear their conscience and to be free of public opinion and public fault. In this manner, the words convey a means to self-actualization which can best take place away from the public sphere, away from public opinion that does not forgive or forget and away from the code of conduct that leaves no room for error. This is the reason that the convent serves as a place not only to shield these women from the strict behavior codes and dangers or opinion of the outside world, but to give these women their own sword and shield with which to defend themselves in their quest to fulfill their own obligation of living an autonomous life.

After close examination of life within the convent walls, it is clear that a safe environment for self-actualization was potentially available to women in convent life. Zayas encouraged young women and damaged women to take note of the positive possibilities of choosing the convent as an option. She highlighted the existence of close female friendships and bonds in convent living. Female community is of utmost importance throughout her writing and has been indicated her own personal life. Mercedes Camino indicates that Zayas own friendship

with Ana Caro, another prominent female of the time, was grounds for promoting such relationships in her writing in her article *María de Zayas and Ana Caro: The Space of Woman's Solidarity in the Spanish Golden Age* (3). We see numerous female friendships in her writing such as those between Doña Lisis and Doña Isabel of the frame story, Doña Estefanía and Doña Isabel as well as Doña Isabel and Zaida in *Esclava de su amante*, Doña Florentina and Doña Magdalena in *Estragos que causa el vicio*, and Doña Laurela and Doña Estefanía in *Amar solo para vencer*.

It is important to note, however, that those female relationships that exist outside of the convent world are most often torn apart by social obligations, deceptions and misinterpretations. Doña Estefanía and Doña Isabel's friendship is temporarily cut off when Estefanía places the blame on Doña Isabel for her brother's illness. It is restored when Doña Isabel joins Estefanía in the convent. Doña Isabel and Zaida both wish for the hand of Don Miguel in marriage, resulting in a notable strain on their relationship and ending in the death of both Zaida and Don Miguel. Doña Florentina and Doña Magdalena are stepsisters that more closely resemble blood sisters because of their close bond. Yet Doña Florentina falls dangerously in love with Don Dionís, the husband of Magdalena. As a result of that situation, Magdalena is brutally murdered by her husband. In *Amar solo para vencer*, the young Doña Laurela forms a close friendship with her supposedly female servant, Estefanía. When she finds out that Doña Estefanía is really don Esteban, who disguised himself in the hopes to eventually gain her affection, she goes against her father's wishes and agrees to marry him, resulting in her carefully thought out "accidental" death. Through the many female friendships in her writing, Zayas demonstrates the power that the outside, male powered world has to destroy them and the beneficial power that female friendship has for self-actualization.



The one friendship that withstands the secular world is that of Doña Isabel and Doña Lisis who eventually enter the convent together. Their situation is unique from the others in that Doña Isabel has already encountered and experienced the harmful consequences of the outside world and of contact with the male and its effect on all her relationships. Doña Lisis, on the other hand, is about to enter into the potentially hazardous state of marriage. After telling her story, Doña Isabel reveals to the reader her wish to enter into the convent with the permission of her mistress, Doña Lisis. Doña Lisis, in turn, grants permission after hearing the *Desengaños* at the *sarao* and the danger that comes from contact with males in the outside world. She then joins Doña Isabel in her desire to enter the convent. Because their relationship was short-lived in the secular world, they were able to avoid the harmful effects that the women's relationships in the *Desengaños* experienced. One would expect their individual self-actualization and friendship to develop further in the convent.

Historically, as described in chapter two, the convent was the home to a female community in which women were encouraged to depend upon one another for spiritual guidance and development (Vollendorf 179). It was a place where strong female community created a "home away from home" (Lehfeltdt 43) and permitted women to stand on more equal footing without the deceptions and conniving of others in the outside world. Therefore, both historical and Zayas' literary evidence illustrate the power of the convent to repair self image, important friendships and to build a thriving female community with purpose. Such a community may have been the perfect home for the development of women's autonomy and self sufficiency without the often harmful influence of the codes of behavior that predetermined a woman's fate.

A key element in reaching this female autonomy or self-actualization was through education and intellectual pursuits. The convent was one of the few spaces available for

women's education (Ortega Lopez 292) which is a recurring theme in the narratives written by Zayas. The value of female intelligence and self-awareness is especially reflected in the characters of Doña Isabel and Doña Lisis. The narrator makes reference to Lisis' intelligence when describing the life-threatening illness that she acquired through the harmful actions of Don Juan. "Pues unas veces se hallaba ya entre las manos de la muerte, y otras (aunque pocas) con mas alivio, tuvo lugar su divino entendimiento de obrar en su alma nuevos propósitos..." (Yllera 116). The illness experienced by Lisis is representative of the potential harms of the secular, male dominated world and her new purpose is spiritual. Her intelligence, a trait not highly valued in females during the time period was what helped her survive the illness along with the help of her new slave, Zelima. Zelima, actually Doña Isabel, a noblewoman dressed as a slave, also exemplifies female intelligence. "Era mora, y su nombre Zelima, de gallardo entendimiento y muchas gracias, como eran leer, escribir, cantar, tañer, bordar y, sobre todo, hacer excelentísimos versos" (Yllera 117). Through her own intelligence and that of her slave and friend Zelima, Lisis is able to overcome the illness caused by a man in her life. Representatively, the frame story and experience suggest that the "illness" of the subordination of females can be overcome through intellectual pursuits and female bonds. This portrayal of the power of female intelligence is another way in which the convent serves as the perfect home for the development of women's independence and individuality.

One method of portraying this intelligence to the public sphere was through writing. Zayas, as a prominent woman writer is an example since, though a woman, she still managed to assert her opinions and beliefs through her writing and earned respect amongst her male peers. Zayas projects her belief in the power and value of writing through the words of Matilde, the

narrator of *Amar solo para vencer*. Matilde states her opinion about the role of writing and critical judgment by others.

Más en eso, me la ganen, porque jamás dije mal de las obras ajenas; que hay poetas y escritores que se pudren de que los otros escriban. Todo lo alabo, todo lo estimo. Si es levantadísimo, lo envidio, no que lo haya trabajado su dueño, sino no haber sido yo la que lo haya alcanzado, y juzgo en siendo obra del entendimiento, que cuando no se estime de ella otra cosa sino el desvelo de quien la hizo, hay mucho que estimar, y supuesto que yo no atropello ni digo mal de los trabajos ajenos, mereceré de cortesía que se diga bien de los míos (Yllera 295).

Here Matilde indicates there is value and credibility in all writing, regardless of whether the author is male or female, renown or not. In another instance in the narrative, she encourages women to write, regardless of what others may expect of them, through the words of Doña Isabel of *Esclava de su amante*, who throughout the *Desengaños* is noted for her poetry writing skills. Doña Isabel explains that she was outstanding in the kingdom and even more so in terms of her ability to write poetry. She identifies some of her critics as ignoramuses who feel threatened by her success as a woman writer, as if by writing well she and other women writers could reduce their male counterparts' abilities simply by writing.

Fui en todo extremada, y más en hacer versos, que era el espanto de aquel reino, y la envidia de muchos no tan peritos en esta facultad; que hay algunos ignorantes que, como si las mujeres les quitaran el entendimiento por tenerle, se consumen de los aciertos ajenos. ¡Bárbaro, ignorante! Si lo sabes hacer, hazlos, que no te roba nadie tu caudal; si son buenos los que no son tuyos, y más si son de dama, adóralos y alábalos; y si malos,

discúlpala, considerando que no tiene más caudal, y que es digna de más aplauso en una mujer que en un hombre, por adornarlos con menos arte (Yllera 128).

Through the character of Doña Isabel, Zayas encourages women to write regardless of societal expectations of the female sex or the perception of the others. She reiterates that if one encounters well-written verses, hold them in high regard. If these fine verses happen to be written by a woman, adore them and praise them especially since have been rendered with less experience. She also argues that when poets are not as successful and forges lesser verses; forgive the poet for they were working with less ability than others.

Women may have been able to write of their own accord outside of the convent walls during the time period. However the convent was the place in which it was most socially acceptable for women to write and where their work was most likely to receive public recognition. In *The Lives of Women: A History of Inquisitional Spain* Vollendorf discusses women's writing and their opportunities for being published in Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Unlike other parts of Europe, Spain saw only a handful of women writers published before 1700. Indeed, the best known writers from the period were nuns who wrote within convent walls: Teresa of Ávila and the Mexican nun Juana Inés de la Cruz. Hundreds of other nuns also wrote prose, poetry, plays and letters that document the creative and historical lives of women religious. Outside the convent, the book market remained in the control of men, and only a few women successfully penetrated that market (57).

Therefore, by constantly promoting life in the convent for women as well praising the act of writing throughout her work, Zayas also encourages other women to assert their individual ideas through writing.

The convent was the place most conducive to their intellectual success where they were able to pursue writing because, according to Vollendorf, “Living in environments that validated their intellectual and spiritual capacities, female religious often infused their texts with a sense of confidence and investment in women’s endeavors” (97). Not only would women be able to write in the convent, but the atmosphere which surrounded them provided them with the confidence and security to shed light on the defense of women as is so often promoted in *Desengaños amorosos*. Another example can be found in *El verdugo de su esposa* in which the narrator states the importance of women defending themselves. “Y que nuestra intención no es de solo divertir, sino de aconsejar a las mujeres que miren por su opinión y teman con tantas libertades como el día de hoy profesan, no les suceda lo que a las que han oído y oirán les ha sucedido, y también por defenderlas...” (Yllera 200). Writing had a purpose in the *Desengaños*. It was to warn others of dangers. Zayas works suggest that women writers could do more good than harm by writing and warning women of the dangers in the secular world from the legitimized environment of the convent.

A woman’s capability to defend herself and take the liberty to express herself was much more possible in the convent where a woman gained an education and the ability to write. Within the walls of the convent she was able to express her own unique thoughts and ideas for the benefit of others in the community of nuns or the community of women outside the convent walls.

One of these individualistic messages is that of gender equality that Zayas proposes (albeit in fiction) in the *Desengaños amorosos*. The equal capabilities of men and women are described by Matilde, the narrator of *Amar solo para vencer*. Matilde complains that contemporary men have attempted to make women seem even weaker than nature made them in the first place. “Que ya que los hombres nos han usurpado ese título, con afeminarnos más que naturaleza nos afeminó, que ella, si nos dio flacas fuerzas y corazones tiernos, por lo menos, nos infundió el alma tan capaz para todo como la de los varones” (Yllera 294). Here Zayas challenges societal beliefs about women’s natural incapability, claiming that while the female sex may be physically weaker, the female soul is every bit as capable as that of a man. While Zayas does not make explicit where these capabilities might be utilized, the destiny of all her capable female characters are destined for the convent. Some of the duties that women were often responsible for in the convent are the perfect example of how Zayas promoted choice of convent life for women of strength and dedication. Not only would they gain the opportunity to articulate individual thoughts and express them to their community through their writing, but they would also be afforded the opportunity to utilize and learn the basic life skills that women otherwise were not allowed to practice.

The opportunity to use and to gain knowledge available to women in the convent is what Zayas promoted. Here women would be encouraged them to fend for themselves in realms that were controlled by males in the secular world. While women in homes were to remain silent, serve her husband and her children, and run a household, nuns often took on the duties of book keeping and financial and general management of the convent(Lehfeltdt 57). This meant that they became familiar with certain political and economic processes that taught these women how to assert a power not associated with their gender in the outside world. Through possessing the

knowledge of how to run a large institution, they were much more able to control their own lives and to function without a male guardian while still maintaining their social status and family honor through the protection of the convent.

Through her writings and example, Zayas encouraged women to take control of their situations and to pursue a self-actualized life with purpose. She asserts the importance of controlling one's own life in the words of narrator of *Amar solo para vencer*, Matilde, who expresses the danger she knows she may encounter through telling the truth regarding women's capabilities and men's downfalls.

Y en el tiempo que hoy alcanzamos, quien ha de decir verdades ha de estar resuelto a irse del mundo, porque si nos han de desterrar de él los que las escuchan, más vale irnos nosotros, pues la mayor suerte es vencerse uno a sí mismo, que no dejarse vencer de otros. De esto nació el matarse los gentiles, porque como no alcanzaban la inmortalidad del alma, en cambio de no verse abatidos y ultrajados de sus enemigos, no estimaban la vida, y tenían por honrosa victoria morir a sus mismas manos, que no a las de sus enemigos. Y de esta misma causa nace hoy el decir mal los hombres de las mujeres, porque los desengañan, si no con las palabras, con las obras (Yllera 293).

In the final sentence of her argument Matilde explains that men speak ill of women because women are no longer willing to be mistreated by their enemy and indicate their rejection of the illusion of what men think her life "should be" by indicating her resistance either with words or deeds.

With Matilde's words, Zayas encourages women to take control of their own lives rather than allow the male to dictate their actions, thoughts, and decisions. Through the comparison of

the gentiles committing suicide rather than surrender, she encourages women to defend themselves rather than letting their lives be controlled by a male. Certainly, during the time period, the possibility for noblewomen to truly take control of their lives and still be respected by society was unlikely. Yet within the convent, women who chose to leave secular life were much more able to self-actualize through reading and writing, expressing their own beliefs and by gaining access to the knowledge that outside of the convent was monopolized solely by males.

As a respected author of the time period María de Zayas may have been more capable than other female writers to make public such ideas. She encouraged women to defend themselves against the misogynist society she portrays in what is now called the era of the Spanish Golden Age. Nevertheless her status as a noblewoman and highly-esteemed author amongst her contemporaries did not make her exempt from society's preconceived notions and expectations of noblewomen. This meant that she needed to disguise her ideas carefully in order to meet these standards. She does exactly this by using a female narrative voice and a frame tale that has both a narrator and a co-educational audience that makes comments, and by utilizing the convent ending for many of her *Desengaños amorosos*. Historical records of the country during the time show that it was a dangerous environment for women. Censorship could have made it impossible for Zayas to publish her writing if not cleverly articulated through the voices and experiences of women.

The female characters in each story undergo tremendous tragedies which all result in the loss of their honor due to misplacement into other homes, being orphaned, being married and abandoned by absent husbands, etc. After having lost their honor, historical truth is that the only socially respectable option for these noblewomen was life in the convent. Therefore, María de Zayas does not depart from societal norms by placing the characters of Doña Isabel, Doña Lisis,



Doña Florentina, Doña Inés, and Doña Camila in the convent after the loss of their honor and, therefore, their social value. In a society that depended heavily on women's honor, the convent was the best option not only for them as individuals but for the preservation of the strict code for behavior that was accepted in contemporary sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish society. "Damaged women" who were unmarriageable and, therefore, social pariahs for the men who abused them, were abandoned or rejected. They could only survive legitimately within the protection of the convent's walls. There, noblewomen of all ages could meet the virtuous and chaste ideals set forth by society because of their separation from the temptations and dangers of the secular world and the environment that expected spiritual pursuit. Zayas demonstrates the development and preservation of these societal standards in her characters that enter the convent.

Through the religious language found in the brief descriptions of their lives in the convent following the misfortunes they encounter in the secular world, the narrative text portrays to readers the potential for women to achieve the chastity and virtuosity expected of noblewomen and the self-actualization and safe-guarding of self that could only be sought within the confines of the convent.

Still it is curious that despite Zayas' support of the convent as a social institution that strictly adheres to societal principles for women, a contrasting message prevails throughout her work. That message is the need for women to defend themselves and take charge of their situations. Analysis of convent life reveals that her use of the convent as a safe environment for her characters may have promoted much more than virtuosity, saintliness, and chastity. Within the convent, women gained access to a life that was simply not possible outside of it. They fostered spiritually and intellectually stimulating relationships and communities with other women, an experience that Zayas' writings imply is difficult to obtain outside of the convent.

## Conclusion

The success and influence that María de Zayas had as a woman writer during the Spanish Golden Age of literature is undeniable. Salvador Montesa explains the immense success of her novels as an example and inspiration for other writers in his book *Texto y contexto en la narrativa de María de Zayas*. “Sus novelas pasaron de mano en mano, se extendieron no solo por España, sino por toda Europa...sirvieron de modelo e incluso de inspiración concreta a muchos autores” (33). Not only were her works popular in Spain but throughout Europe. This popularity can be contributed to the social reality portrayed in her exemplary novels since people could identify and use them as an example of how to live their own lives. Montesa further explains the realistic, though extreme, nature of her novels. “El amor y los obstáculos que se le enfrentan, las venganzas y las muertes, los raptos y aventuras no serían el pan nuestro de cada día en el siglo XVII. Pero si representan lo que los contemporáneos creen” (161). While the situations in which the characters of *Desengaños amorosos* find themselves are extreme, they are representative of the lack of balance in the ideology that was given lip-service in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spain. The powers against which all the female characters struggle represent the historical reality of Spanish noblewomen whose lives were largely controlled by the male. In *Desengaños amorosos*, each character experiences the loss of their honor due to her interaction with a male, whether he is her authority figure, lover, or otherwise unrelated male but “attracted” male.

Zayas solution to the tragedies that her characters undergo is entrance into the convent. The convent is, from society’s viewpoint, the only realistic option for these women, since it was the only acceptable alternative to marriage and family life as stated by Angela Muñoz in *Acciones e intenciones de mujeres en la vida religiosa de los siglos XV y XVI*. “Al admitir la

presencia de mujeres en las distintas órdenes religiosas, que no en el sacerdocio, los conventos fueron, pues, los espacios femeninos oficialmente sancionados como alternativa posible a la vida desarrollada dentro de la familia” (15). The loss of their honor in effect meant the loss of their life and its value (Voltes and Buxo 77). Because marriage was no longer a possibility for these women; the convent was their one opportunity to lead a respectable life. Yet because of Zayas’ constant use of the convent along with many of the messages seen in her work pertaining to the defense of women, it served not only as a means for women to meet the high societal expectations of them, but also as a way to encourage women to take a stand against the misogynous society in which they lived and develop self sufficiency and independence.

Through careful examination of women’s life as married women in the secular world in comparison with women’s lives in the convent, the reasoning behind entering the convent for the characters of María de Zayas has become evident. While both options had similarities, they also present notable differences in lifestyle. Outside the convent, women were confined to the home, learning only what was necessary to tend to the household and they were not able to self-actualize or even able to protect themselves from constant dangers that put their happiness and livelihood in peril. The convent, on the other hand, offered an environment where women could learn to express themselves and to live comfortably without having to adhere to a strict honor code that did not favor them in any way or under the constant supervision of a head of household who saw her as property and saleable merchandize, temptation and burden. These women felt they were under constant scrutiny of a male authority figure that was held responsible for protecting his family honor at all costs. She was simply a liability that had to be controlled and cloistered. Because of his duty to protect her honor, any damage to that honor reflected badly upon him as well and could lead to harsh punishment as is seen continuously in the *Desengaños*

*amorosos* by María de Zayas. Women were expected to be pure, chaste, and honorable yet, due to the many dangers of the secular world as portrayed by Zayas, the ideal was impossible to maintain.

This ideal expected of women was even more enforced in the convent. As representatives of God, the expectation that they remain chaste and virtuous was even more important. Like women in the secular world were restricted to the domestic sphere they were, for the most part, confined within the walls of the convent. Within the convent, women had access to numerous opportunities and other elements not available to women of the secular world. Women in the secular world were constrained to learning only that necessary for marriage, which included domestic duties. They were not often offered any education regarding reading or writing. In contrast, learning to read and write was most often expected of women in the convent. Zayas makes her opinion about the importance of writing evident at various points in her writing, making this one reason she may have encouraged women to enter the convent. Furthermore, their additional duties in the convent often included responsibilities pertaining to the upkeep of the large estate of a convent. This meant they became even more self-sufficient through the knowledge of duties most often reserved for men.

Zayas portrays female relationships outside of the convent as often problematic and easily torn apart. Historical research shows that within the convent, the development of a network of women served as a means of support and guidance. This may have made them even more capable of rising up and defending themselves against the harsh masculine powers of the secular world.

Throughout the writing of María de Zayas, she strongly encourages women to defend themselves from the misfortune that constantly occurs in relationships with men. It becomes evident in each story of *Desengaños amorosos* that the best way to shield themselves from these potential tragedies is through life in the convent. To sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish society entrance in the convent served as a means to protect these women from their own evil nature as dishonored women and as protection from the dangerous state of the country. Zayas most likely promoted this purpose for the convent in order to meet societal standards herself as a respected noblewoman. However, because of the prevailing theme of the defense of women in the *Desengaños amorosos*, the convent served also as a vehicle for change. As indicated by historical evidence, life in the convent was the closest resemblance of an independent life that noblewomen could lead (Vollendorf 94) and still meet society's expectations. Zayas states towards the end of the novellas;

¡Ah damas hermosas, que os pudiera decir, si supiera que como soy oida no había de ser murmurada! ¡Ea, dejemos las galas, rosas y rizos, y volvamos por nosotras: unas, con el entendimiento, y otras con las armas! Y será el mejor desengaño para las que hoy son y las que han de venir (Yllera 231).

In a household under close tutelage of a male authority figure, the idea of women defending themselves with either wit or weapons as this citation suggests is likely to result in severe consequences. Yet in the convent, noblewomen had access to reading and writing and the weapons of knowledge which lead to the ability to defend oneself so constantly reiterated by Zayas. It becomes clear after close examination of convent life versus secular married life of Spanish noblewomen that the convent served a higher purpose than simply urging women to protect themselves from the outside world and its many dangers. The female empowering themes

of self-defense, female community, and education in her *Desengaños amorosos* correspond closely with the life of women in the convent. Therefore, while on the surface she appeared to be promoting the life which most closely resembles the ideal noblewoman of Spanish Golden Age society, she was also encouraging just the opposite. If her female readers took her exemplary messages to heart and entered into the convent, they would gain not only societal respect, but also the education, the support network, and the self sufficiency to defend her from the misogynous society that surrounded her.

## Works Cited

- Ahlgren, Gillian T. W. *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996. Print.
- Alcalde, Pilar. *Estrategias tematicas y narrativas en María de Zayas: Las prácticas de la femineidad*. Diss. University of Southern California, 1998. Dissertations & Theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 25 Oct. 2010.
- Birriel Salcedo, Margarita M. "Mujeres y género en la España del siglo de oro." *Las mujeres en la sociedad española del siglo de oro*. Granada: Colección feminae, 1998. 37-56. Print.
- Camino, Mercedes Maroto. "María de Zayas and Ana Caro: The Space of Women's Solidarity in the Spanish Golden Age. (Cover Story)." *Hispanic Review* 67.1 (1999): 3. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Web. 20 Jan. 2011
- Colburn-Alsoop, Sara Noelle. *The Symbolic Order and María de Zayas's "Desenganos amorosos"*. Diss. Indiana University, 2003. Dissertations & Theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 25 Oct. 2010.
- Corteguera, Luis R, and Marta V Vicente. *Women, Texts, and Authority in the Early Modern Spanish World*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2003. Print.
- Defourneaux, Marcelin. *Daily Life in Spain in the Golden Age*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971. Print.
- De Zayas, María, *Desengaños amorosos*. Ed. Alicia Yllera. 3rd ed. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1998. Print.
- El Saffar, Ruth. *Ana/Lisis/Zayas: Reflections on Courtship and Literary Women in María de Zayas Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*. Associated University Press, 1995. 192-216. Print.

- Friedman, Edward H. "Innocents Punished: The Narrative Models of *María de Zayas*." *Confluencia* 20.1 (2004): 9-16. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.
- Folguera, Pilar, Margarita Ortega López, Cristina Segura, and Elisa Garrido González. *Historia de las mujeres en España*. Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 1997. Print.
- Huften, Olwen. "In the World, Of the World, and For the World. Women and the Religious Life in Counter Reformation Europe." *Religiosidad Femenina (ss. VIII-XVIII)*. Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 1991. 197-215. Print.
- Jehensen, Yvonne, and Marcia Welles. "María de Zayas's Wounded Women: A Semiotics of Violence." *Gender, Identity, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2000. 178-98. Print.
- Lehfeldt, Elizabeth A. *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: the Permeable Cloister*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005. Print.
- Merrim, Stephanie. *Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999. Print.
- Montesa Peydro, Salvador. *Texto y contexto en la narrativa de María de Zayas*. Madrid: Dirección General De La Juventud Y Promoción Sociocultural, 1981. Print.
- Muñoz Fernández, Angela. *Acciones e intenciones de mujeres: vida religiosa de las madrileñas (ss. XV-XVI)*. Madrid: Horas y Horas , 1995. Print.
- Muñoz Fernández, Angela. *Mujer y experiencia religiosa en el marco de la santidad medieval*. Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 1988. Print.
- Muñoz Fernández, Angela, and María del Mar Graña Cid. *Religiosidad femenina: expectativas y realidades (ss. VIII-XVIII)*. Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 1991. Print.



- Muñoz Fernández, Angela. *Las mujeres en el cristianismo medieval: imágenes teóricas y cauces de actuación religiosa*. Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 1989. Print.
- Ortega Lopez, Margarita. "El Periodo Barroco (1565-1700)." *La historia de las mujeres en España*. Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 1997. 253-341. Print.
- Paun De Garcia, Susan. "Zayas as Writer: Hell Hath No Fury." *María De Zayas: Dynamics of Discourse*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995. 40-51. Print.
- Perry, Mary Elizabeth, and Anne J. Cruz. *Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. Print.
- Perry, Mary E. "Crisis and Disorder in the World of María de Zayas y Sotomayor." *María De Zayas: Dynamics of Discourse*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995. 23-29. Print.
- Sánchez, Magdalena S, and Alain Saint-Saëns. *Spanish Women in the Golden Age: Images And Realities*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. Print.
- Sánchez Lora, José Luis. *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca*. Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1988. Print.
- Stoll, Anita K, and Dawn L Smith. *Gender, Identity, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2000. Print.
- Surtz, Ronald E. *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain: the Mothers of Saint Teresa of Avila*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. Print.
- Vasileski, Irma V. *María de Zayas y Sotomayor: Su época y su obra*. New York: Plaza Mayor Ediciones, 1972. Print.
- Velasco, Sherry M. "Visualizing Gender on the Page in Convent Literature." *Women, Texts, and Authority in the Early Modern Spanish World*. Burlington: Ashgate, VT. 127-48. Print.

- Vollendorf, Lisa. *The Lives of Women: a New History of Inquisitional Spain*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005. Print.
- Voltes, Pedro, and María J. Buxo. *Las mujeres en la historia de España*. 1st ed. Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1986. Print.
- Williamsen, Amy R, and Judith A Whitenack. *María De Zayas: the Dynamics of Discourse*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press , 1995. Print.
- Williamsen, Amy R. "Challenging the Code: Honor in María de Zayas." *María de Zayas: Dynamics of Discourse*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995. 133-51. Print.
- Yllera, Fernández Alicia. *Parte segunda del sarao y entretenimiento honesto: (Desengaños amorosos)*. 3rd ed. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1998. Print.
- Zayas y Sotomayor, María de, and Harriet Boyer. *The Disenchantments of Love*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. Print.