

## ◆ Chapter 6

### **Demolishing Gender-Based Violence One (Early Modern) Text at a Time**

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When the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements burst onto the social and cultural landscape in 2017, first in the United States and then worldwide, it quickly became abundantly clear that nothing would be the same from then on. A door that had been pushed on for centuries was now finally open, but it still resisted a full opening that would finally give prominence to the voices of women and that, above all, would grant credibility to those voices. Immediately our university classrooms were flooded with the energy and the discussions that arose around both movements, brought by students trying to find a way in which the texts and experiences of Spain's early modernity could help them make sense of what was happening, as well as the consequences it had in their own lives.

It was during these conversations that many of us confirmed what we already knew, even if we were reluctant to fully believe it: the generation born between the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first shares with previous generations a gender-based inequality that greatly affects their personal and professional experiences. Reading and discussing together texts by Cervantes, Zayas, Caro or Sor Juana under this prism made clear the urgency of making sense of the present, the past, the future and their undeniable three-way relationships. During those class sessions, theoretical discussions on the relevance of the humanities, of literature, or of a field apparently as far removed from today's realities as Spain's early modern literature and culture, became unnecessary, since that relevance imposed itself as undeniable. In any case, these theoretical approaches, such as the one Castillo and Egginton lay out in *What Would Cervantes Do?* are very necessary because they illuminate the diachronic and synchronic connections that are often hidden by the overly narrow vision of culture and even life. Castillo and Egginton make daring comparisons that will shock more than one critic when they place Cervantes,

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Zayas, Sor Juana, *La pícaro Justina*, Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* series or the Netflix series *Alias Grace* on the same analytical level. Readers of early modern texts of course know and enjoy those more recent works, and it would be absurd to ask those readers to ban from their cultural imaginary the products they communicate with on a daily basis, and limit themselves to analyzing works and authors of early modernity in isolation, avoiding any connections they might find with their current realities and cultural responses to those realities.

Castillo and Egginton's allegation about the fallacy of trying to reconstruct the original meaning of a work is especially poignant, as it rightly discredits a type of archeological analysis of literature that denies it the ability to update itself with each era, each new visit from a new reader with a renewed cultural baggage. Those who defend the possibility of recovering that alleged original, primordial message, fall into a self-imposed trap, removing the relevance of classic works today, therefore also denying them their "classic" condition. Would anyone still dare to give up the readings of *Don Quixote* that invite us to consider the adventures of the knight and the more than 80 characters that accompany him in connection to the needs, anxieties and adventures of the postmodern human being? It is almost ridiculous to raise the impossibility of reading *Don Quixote* in the twenty-first century and reduce it to the parody of the books of chivalry that supposedly first motivated its writing. Why then do some insist on discrediting those renewed readings when it comes to María de Zayas or Sor Juana Inés, for example? Could it be that interpreting the works of these authors in light of the gender inequalities still present in our world shames us by revealing an image of ourselves that is too close to a state of affairs that we thought had been overcome? Or perhaps re-reading these works brings us face to face with the reality of that inequality, which we are told so often has already ended in a useless attempt to silence the voices that denounce the self-complacency and absolute blindness of this negationist vision?

If there is a particularly harmful denialism, because it is literally a murderous one, it is the one that insists on the non-existence of gender violence. On September 29, 2021, the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia* published an article with the headline "The denial of sexist violence soars among young people and 20 [percent] no longer consider it a problem," in which it was stated that among men only 50.4 percent consider that it is a very serious social problem. The percentage has decreased by 3.8 points since 2017. On the other hand, the percentage of individuals who deny or limit the importance of this violence has grown significantly, especially among men. In Spain, political discourses such as the far-right Vox party do nothing but spread, by way of an undisguised populism, an "alternative" truth presented as the only one worthy of credibility based on simplistic messages, which

manipulate data, appeal to reports based on unconfirmed statistics, and are presented under a complicit neutrality or skepticism.

On the other hand, both in Spain and in the United States, we need to reflect much more deeply on how gender violence intersects with racial violence, and as long as we do not delve into this double discrimination and its social and cultural manifestations, we will be only hinting at walking the path toward equality. Like Castillo and Egginton rightly point out, we can identify “a trend, beginning in the late fifteenth century in Spain, to eradicate the spectre of female desire and thereby legitimize a model of femininity based on chastity, marital love, and duty” (98), and “this exclusion was bequeathed to the Enlightenment, and thus to contemporary Western mentality” (108). We must explore the intersectionality of this trend with all the other markers of female subjectivity during those centuries, since it is evident that their mutual dependence plays, in itself, a pivotal role in how this subjectivity was formed and perceived transhistorically. Yasmin Jiwani, in *Discourses of Denial*, criticizes liberal definitions of violence drawing on anti-racist and postcolonial feminist frameworks, and argues that racism and sexism are forms of structural and interpersonal violence and not simply motivations for acts of individual physical and psychological harm. By “discourses of denial” Jiwani is, in part, referring to the conflation of the connections between various forms of violence (physical, institutional and structural) and the erasure of the ways oppressions intersect. This erasure, she argues, renders invisible, and reproduces, the harms inflicted against racialized girls and women of color. The intersectional analysis of the #MeToo and the #BLM movements, or Spain’s immigration crisis, provides a clearer perspective of epistemological anxieties about male hegemony and female sexuality, and the control of women’s lives derived from them. If women’s desire is threatening for an ideology that promotes gender division, even if subtly, the desire of the “Other” woman is even more threatening as it transgresses a double limit to the articulation of femininity imposed by patriarchy.

Zoraida’s desire in *Don Quixote* or Zelima’s freedom in *La esclava de su amante* need to be tamed by a commitment to Christianity or a return to an identity liberated from any ambiguity. And when the ambiguity is not resolved and the woman’s desire is not reabsorbed into a normative portrait of femininity, that woman is mercilessly destroyed. That is the fate of the black woman in *Tarde llega el desengaño*, whose main fault was not having lied about Elena, but her ability to disrupt the racial social order while simultaneously living her desire with no regrets while the white, passive and obedient Elena is caged in a cave inside her own home.

Castillo and Egginton poignantly underscore Don Juan Manuel’s didactic “Exemplo XXXV” of his fourteenth-century *Libro de los ejemplos del conde Lucanor y de Patronio* (*Tales of Count Lucanor*) which inspired

not only Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew* (1590–1592) but also movies like *Kiss Me Kate* (1953) and the more recent *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999). The main theme of these works is “the culturally determined expectation/obligation to inhabit the symbolic placeholder *man/husband*: in this case, head of the household whose authority and dominion ought to be unquestioned” (Castillo and Egginton 75), which in the *Libro de los ejemplos* especially serves as a justification for resorting to violence if needed to maintain the accepted rules of gender differentiation. All these works not only “reify, and capitalize on spectacular images of ‘protective’ masculinity that glorify violence” (75) but they also portray the domestic space as an extension of that violent masculinity that leaves women unprotected in her supposedly “protective” home. Zayas warns women to avoid the prison-house of marriage and there is “no more graphic illustration of the oppressive and confining ‘architecture . . . of patriarchy’ than the image of an innocent wife imprisoned inside a house wall in Zayas’s *desengaño* (*La Inocencia castigada* [*Innocence Punished*]) (Castillo and Egginton 77). Kidnapping and isolation are certainly sub-types of violence against women which prevent their contact with the outside world beyond the familiar or domestic realm, with different degrees of violence being used to attain this goal, in a variety of conditions, places, and with different duration for the actual kidnapping. As Amanda Flather states in her study on gender and space in early modern society, “space was the basis for the formation of gender identities” (1) and “space and gender were intimately linked in early modern theoretical constructions of patriarchal order” (77). Whoever controls the space has the handle of power in the relationship and, even though the home was the domestic realm where the wife could exercise domestic authority, it is also true that legally the property of the house where women lived usually belonged to their husbands or their fathers, and therefore a man held the real control of that space. As I have indicated elsewhere, home was then a mixed space with slippery meanings where the woman could find protection and security; but, at the same time, it was the most dangerous space for her when her father, brother or husband felt that she had trespassed the limits of appropriate behavior, disrupted domestic order and had therefore tainted the domestic (male) space.<sup>1</sup> Zayas’s stories introduce the reader to a universe characterized by suffocating cruelty, unlimited violence, and a paralyzing helplessness where female characters are enclosed, confined (sometimes physically and always symbolically) in a patriarchal prison which literally destroys and eliminates them. Zayas builds spaces for her stories that limit women’s world to a very controlled set of locations where their movements are also constrained and limited to their homes or close surrounding areas. The insistence on describing the spaces where women can conduct their normal activities and on emphasizing the different relation that men have with those

same spaces adds to this awareness of the limitations on women's movement and of the constant threat of transgressing those constrictions.

The practice of violently confining women in their own homes is far from gone, even in the midst of social and legal systems where it is largely rejected and legally punished. Today, there are plenty of examples around us of women being kidnapped by their partners and in their own houses. In September of 2017, a woman and her one-year-old child were rescued by deputies while being held as prisoners in their Riverview (Florida) home. The woman's husband and his parents were taken to jail after being accused of beating her and holding a knife to her throat. According to the press, "Her husband had contacted his parents to tell them his wife was disobedient" (*Tampa Bay Reporter* September 2, 2017). In Robertsville, Missouri, a UPS driver showed up to pick up a package at a residence in December 2016 and the woman who answered the door handed over a package with the words 'Call 911' on it. Police rescued the woman, who was being held captive by her husband along with their child for days without food or water. In July of 2012, West Virginia authorities arrested Peter Lizon, 37, on accusations that he kept his forty-three-year-old wife, Stephanie Lizon, captive and tortured for the better part of the decade, including leaving her shackled during childbirth. She showed burns on her back and breasts from irons and frying pans, and scars on her wrists and ankles. A Jackson County Chief Sheriff's Deputy stated that "This appears to go beyond abuse to what I would consider torture" (Goldman). In 2009, a female lawyer was abducted at gunpoint in a parking lot and held hostage by her husband during a 12-hour standoff with police in the home they once shared in South Windsor, CT. During that time, she was handcuffed to an eyebolt in a basement wall; he told her the house was rigged to explode, and repeatedly held a gun to her head while he recited countdowns to what was to be her death. When he torched the house and it was literally burning down above their heads, the wife managed to unscrew the bolt while he was distracted and she escaped. In July, 2016, an Atlanta woman declared that she was tortured for days by her husband, who allegedly poured hot water into her ears so she couldn't hear her newborn and tried to blind her so she couldn't see the baby. Her husband drugged her with beverages before torturing her in front of their two-week old baby boy and was also accused of tying the woman to the bed and cutting off her hair when she tried to get away. He also allegedly tried to remove some of her teeth and bite off her lip, and was likewise accused of stabbing her in the chest so that she couldn't feed her baby.

Visibility and denunciation of this type of violence are nowadays the most powerful tools to de-authorize it. Writing in a world which downplayed and normalized gendered violence, Zayas showed that society (and women themselves) cannot accept the status quo that tradition and custom dictate.

She denounces what we know today as femicide (the killing of a woman or girl on account of her gender). She gives visibility to the unlimited violence that women suffer and exposes the impunity for these crimes. Few authors from any time period have so eloquently carried the banner for the change of gender norms in their society, and her brave and determined voice leaves the reader with a lasting awareness of being fed up with women's pain, suffering, and blood.

Another form of violence against women consists of silencing her when her body has lost the capacity to adjust to patriarchal demands: to be a wife and a mother. Once middle-aged women enter the vital stage in which their body frees them from reproductive functions, their presence begins to be silenced through a ghosting mechanism that is especially visible in markedly visual worlds such as cinema or TV shows. When actresses denounce the scarcity of women over 50 in movies, their complaint has deeper implications than a simple protest about the conditions of a certain profession. It is a complaint about the lack of stories about these women, about what it means to be a woman when youth and beauty, the attributes traditionally most valued in women, are not the elements that sustain their social capital. Not even their role as mothers validates their position as a subject any longer, since motherhood is represented as the ability to take care of small children, defenseless beings who cannot take care of themselves. Caregiving is the most valued aspect of the representation of motherhood, but the mother's role seems to lose relevance once her children start to enter adulthood. This is evident in real life situations: what is the percentage of mothers who attend school functions, parent-teacher conferences and the like in elementary and middle school as compared to the percentage of fathers? How do those percentages change once children are almost adults, in high school and beyond? It is easy to connect this lack of mothers to the missing mothers of Spanish early modern literature, another manifestation of the early modern rearticulation of femininity (Castillo and Egginton 94). When issues such as honor conflicts, love quarrels, and anything that affects children at an intellectual and legal level is taken care of by fathers, consolidating "the radical gender division that was rapidly becoming the centrepiece of state ideology" (Castillo and Egginton 94).

The celebration of women's youth and beauty, and the crazy and useless race against time in which they are invited to participate in order to avoid the inevitable passage of time and its physical effects is precisely what Sor Juana denounces in "Este que ves, engaño colorido" (This coloured counterfeit that thou beholdest). The "artistic" changes that erase the signs of aging from her face, like Castillo and Egginton explain, also hide her true nature, her whole existence: "She seems to be implying that the lying conceits that erase the signs of aging from her face . . . hide her existential truth: her life as well as

her impending death” (114). And isn’t part of Celestina’s immoral portrait her capacity to desire, a characteristic abhorrent when associated with an older woman? In January 2022, a 77-year-old actress, Petra Martínez, shocked the audience when she received a Feroz award (Spain-based film and television awards presented by the Association of Cinematographic Informers) for her role in *La vida era eso* when she explained:

En esta película, lo más importante es haberme masturbado delante de mucha gente. Yo ahora me masturbo como tres o cuatro veces al día porque he cogido la manía. Hay muchas cosas que las mujeres de mi edad no sabemos. Por ejemplo, el ‘satisfesión’ [Satisfyer], no sé si lo habéis probado pero es genial.

(In this movie, the most important thing is that I masturbated in front of many people. Now I masturbate about three or four times a day because I’ve caught the mania. There are many things that women my age do not know. For example, the ‘satisfaction’ [Satisfyer], I don’t know if you’ve tried it, but it’s great.)

These statements immediately went viral because it was shocking to hear a woman at that age talk about masturbation so openly, as explained in various newspapers and media outlets. Undoubtedly the concrete topic of her speech is one of the factors that caused such a stir, but above all it was the fact that it was a woman who, at that age, confessed her ability to desire, to speak naturally in public about that desire, and dared to place in the forefront the reality of so many women whose sexuality is silenced in the postmenopausal years. While it is true that the value system that gave large social value to women’s chastity as a signifier of honor in early modernity has lost a big part of its strength, the twenty-first century still has to reframe women’s age inside a value system that keeps assigning a higher value to youth and all the elements that it implies. There is no doubt that female sexual desire was suppressed and transformed into a limited discourse of love over a foundation of honor thus serving “the ends of a new form of political power, one that will spill over from the relations of subjects to monarchs to that of citizens to each other and to the state” (Castillo and Egginton 97) starting in early modernity. Mature women are one of the most stigmatized groups in the ongoing process

of recovering women's desire and repossessing their femininity while countering the modern patriarchal subject. This marginalization arises from the fact that these experienced, stronger, and more defiant women are most feared by a system that struggles to contain them. Like the "widow" in early modern society, of which Spanish literature offers great examples—Lope's Leonarda in *La viuda valenciana* (*The Valencian Widow*), Lucrecia in Zayas's *Tarde llega el desengaño* (*Too Late Undeceived*), etc.—, the mature woman is the hardest to control by patriarchal norms based on the ideology of honor and the control of the female chastity it so desperately depends upon.

Edward Behrend-Martínez explains that being a man in Spain "includes keeping one's word, supporting one's family, heading a patriarchal household, demonstrating sexual prowess, sobriety, maintaining one's independence of thought and action, and defending family and personal honor" (1074). This definition of masculinity can be applied to very distant time periods, and it is periodically challenged when patriarchal hierarchies are questioned. That is when violence is employed as a resource to re-establish male control. Much has been written about the masculinity crisis in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Behrend-Martínez, Donnell, amongst others). The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been the scene of an even deeper crisis of masculinity. Robin DiAngelo has coined the expression "white fragility" to describe the disbelieving defensiveness that white people exhibit when their ideas about race and racism are challenged—and particularly when they feel implicated in white supremacy. We can definitely recognize that male fragility, the anxiety felt by men who believe they are falling short of cultural standards of manhood, is a reality. But it would be even more effective to propose that it is patriarchy itself which has shown its fragility for decades now, and it is that fragility that keeps pushing back, defensively and disoriented before the growth and increasing validation of gender equality as a social and cultural pillar of Western society. Patriarchal fragility is at the core of the processes that silence, ignore, humiliate, disregard, disdain and hurt women.

Telling one's story of violence is one of the hardest experiences for a victim. The humiliation, the scrutiny, the mockery, the indifference that these women often suffer are a continuation of the already-lived violence, reliving the trauma and re-enacting it in the telling itself. What in other traumatic experiences is an empowering act, in the violence against women turns against them, working as an excuse to deprive them of authority and using their story to delegitimize. What Zayas, Cervantes, Sor Juana, and much more recently the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements tell us is that women must take the lead and tell their stories anyway, because this may be their only chance to conquer their own social space and question their confinement to the victim's role. This involves the occupation of the creative space by women. Women



are not liberated from their many restraints by the society that put them there, or by the (so many times incomplete and unfair) laws. Their liberation must thus come from their discourse, from the voice narrating their stories and denouncing a reality that very often is not even recognized.

## Notes

1. “Early Modern #metoo: María de Zayas and Women’s Confinement.” *Confined Women. The Walls of Female Space in Early Modern Spain*. Ed. Brian M. Phillips and Emily Colbert Cairns. *Hispanic Issues Online* 25 (2020): 191–208; “La viuda valenciana y Tarde llega el desengaño: sexualidad y liberación femenina bajo las sombras” *eHumanista* 22 (2012): 342–56; and *Tan sabia como valerosa. Mujeres y escritura en los Siglos de Oro*. Madrid: Instituto Cervantes, 2020.

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