

6-2012

## Review of: Women in the Prose of María de Zayas

Joan M. Hoffman

Western Washington University, [joan.hoffman@wwu.edu](mailto:joan.hoffman@wwu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl\\_facpubs](https://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl_facpubs)



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hoffman, Joan M., "Review of: Women in the Prose of María de Zayas" (2012). *Modern & Classical Languages*. 7.  
[https://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl\\_facpubs/7](https://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl_facpubs/7)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Humanities at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern & Classical Languages by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

synesthesia, and metaphors, he highlights her use of interrogatives, illustrating the protagonist's fixation on perfection. In her constant self-questioning, she shows her uncertainties about herself and her own mental strength.

Jason R. Jolley examines the entirety of Clarice's *Laços de família* (1960), arguing that she proposes a classical definition of ethics, one that emphasizes self-care rather than the impulse to care for others before the self. Reviewing many of the short stories in the collection, he explicates each one, leaving the reader with the satisfaction of perhaps being one step closer to more fully comprehending these works. Rick J. Santos examines the third short story from *Laços da família*, "Uma galinha," arguing that Clarice "attempts to inscribe the possibility of resistant connections among Active Subjects" (168). While his active explication of Active Subjects is thought-provoking, his dialogue with fellow critic Marta Peixoto's work provides an important model of respectful scholarly engagement. As a conclusion to this section, César Ferreira provides a useful overview of the archetypal Lispector character in his essay. Using "Amor" from *Laços*, he lays out the predominant themes to be found throughout her *oeuvre*: namely, unstable family relationships, encounters with the Other, and concerns with the interiority of the often female character.

In the final essays of the collection, Aparecida Maria Nunes and Alessandra M. Pires highlight a topic often overlooked by critics: Clarice's work for newspapers of the time. Nunes offers a fascinating look at the *crônicas* that she writes using pseudonyms in the 1960s; for Nunes, though these divergent writing identities do not rise to the standard established by Fernando Pessoa, Clarice's alternates should be called heteronyms. Through an examination of Clarice's anthology of *Crônicas, A descoberta do mundo* (1984), Pires underscores her view that paradox, oxymoron, and inconclusiveness are critical to Lispector's writings.

Often when one reads Clarice Lispector, there is a sense of something missing, of not completely understanding that which she is trying to communicate. As a collection, this volume offers a number of dynamic theoretical readings, several of which prompt the reader to return to the original works for another reading. Each essay stands alone in its analysis; as a collection, they serve to emphasize once again the originality of her work. Though perhaps advanced for the novice Clarice reader, the essays offer a wide variety of perspectives on the work of this consummate Brazilian writer.

**Vanessa Valdés**

*The City College of New York, USA*

**O'Brien, Eavan.** *Women in the Prose of María de Zayas*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Tamesis, 2010. Pp. 282. ISBN 9778-1-85566-222-3.

With *Women in the Prose of María de Zayas*, Eavan O'Brien presents a remarkable, exceptionally well-researched addition to the ever-increasing María de Zayas library, albeit with what is, in my estimation, an unfortunate and inexpressive title. O'Brien wholly succeeds in her stated intention to study "the complex ramifications of women's interaction in [Zayas's] prose" (5). Without a doubt, this study does represent "a new contribution to the study of Zayas's prose, unearthing a neglected and innovative aspect, its gynocentrism" (6). Using a very close reading of all twenty tales in *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* and *Desengaños amorosos*, supported by an extensive bibliography and myriad footnotes, O'Brien examines friendships, sisterhood, and their subversion; female relationships crossing the boundaries of class; and mother-daughter relationships, including surrogate mothers and the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

O'Brien's sources are both wide and deep, ranging from the structuralist theories of Gérard Genette; the post-structuralist theories of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous to philosophical thought; literary, ecclesiastical, and art history; Benito Pérez Galdós and Alejo Carpentier; Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Carnival; and Janice Raymond's notion of 'Gyn/affection.' O'Brien makes fine use of all of the major Zayas critics before her and includes

insights from Zayas's drama, *La traición en la amistad*. Further, she summarizes her findings in two handy appendices of "Women's Interrelationships" in both of Zayas's collections (246–47).

The novel aspect to O'Brien's offering is precisely its women-centered, gynocentric approach. While most critics examine María de Zayas's women in relationship to men and the brutal patriarchy of her time, O'Brien focuses on the women's relationships with one another. In addition, while the twenty internal tales are by far the most popular topic of scrutiny among most critics, O'Brien's is the rare volume that studies Zayas's two collections as a whole, examining the external frame narrative as much as the interior tales, analyzing how both parts interconnect with regards to the various female relationships therein.

O'Brien concludes that María de Zayas's works are populated with strong women, both good and bad; female relationships are consistently important in both the frame and the tales; sisterly bonds are affirmed, but female treachery can be as dangerous as that perpetrated by men; the convent solution so often employed by Zayas is essential to the development of sisterly bonds, as well as those between mother and daughter, as evidenced in the frame narrative; class boundaries are more permeable than may be supposed; the mother–daughter relationship is foregrounded in a new way in Zayas's work; the importance of motherhood is underscored in both the tales and the frame; a surrogate mother figure often takes the place of an absent biological mother; and the Virgin Mary often plays an important role in maternal surrogacy.

Like many scholars before her, O'Brien argues that Zayas does not seek to transform her female protagonists into revolutionaries; she does not propose solutions that would transcend or transgress social and class expectations. Where O'Brien disagrees, very convincingly, with her sister-critics, however, is with the supposed proto-feminism of María de Zayas espoused by many. O'Brien makes a strong case for refuting this contention by highlighting the lack of sisterhood across classes in Zayas's portrayals of female relationships, a requirement, in her view, for true feminism or proto-feminism. O'Brien argues that "[Zayas] does not attempt to propound a 'sisterhood' that would eclipse all social differences" (107).

Our author quite clearly is more comfortable with the more general term "gynocentrism" with regard to María de Zayas. This is a solid, expressive term that, surprisingly, has not been applied to Zayas's work until now; after reading O'Brien's excellent and convincing treatise, one may wonder why this has been so. This, however, brings me to my only quibble with this fine text—the title, which does nothing to entice a reader to open the book to the treasure that awaits inside. The problem with the title is that it is uninformative and dull. Anyone who is familiar with María de Zayas's work knows that all of her protagonists, and indeed all of the most fascinating characters, are women; nearly the entirety of María de Zayas's world is populated with interesting, remarkable, curious, authoritative, even wicked and unscrupulous women who are dynamic actors in their own stories. With this diversity in mind, O'Brien's title seems overly vague, a mere subtitle that could be easily rounded out and greatly enhanced with the addition of some reference to "gynocentrism," "feminine relationships," or something similar.

While the title of Eavan O'Brien's book may be disappointing, the content is anything but. She has written a work that expertly draws on past research and adeptly provides new perspectives. Hers is a book that belongs in the library of any serious Zayas scholar.

**Joan M. Hoffman**

*Western Washington University, USA*

**Skipper, Eric.** *A Recipe for Discourse: Perspectives on Like Water for Chocolate*. New York: Rodopi, 2010. Pp. 211. ISBN 978-90-420-3192-0.

A dozen years after its publication in 1989 and almost a decade after its filmic release in 1992, *Like Water for Chocolate* still stokes academic debates. Eric Skipper's collection of eleven essays in *A Recipe for Discourse: Perspectives on Like Water for Chocolate* testifies not only to the sustained interest in Laura Esquivel's popular novel and film, but, more importantly, to