

11-19-2019

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Maria Gomez

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Recommended Citation

Gomez, Maria, "Maria de Zayas and Gender Violence in the 17th Century and Today Proposal" (2019). *Humanities Edge Archive Faculty Programs*. 82.
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María de Zayas and Gender Violence in the 17th Century and Today

I am a Professor of Spanish at the Department of Modern Languages and I teach regularly SPW 3820 Foundations to Peninsular Spanish Literature, which includes literary works from the Middle Ages to present. One of the authors that we discuss in class is María de Zayas y Sotomayor, an intriguing and remarkable Spanish 17th-century writer, who is considered a pioneer of modern literary feminism. She is one of the first secular women writers in Spain and the first one who became a best seller for two hundred years, rivaled only by Miguel de Cervantes in popularity. The work that I select for this class is *Disenchantments of Love* (*Desengaños amorosos*, 1647), a book that describes bizarre and shocking scenes of female victimization and male brutality. One of the objectives is to promote awareness of the problem of gender violence, so that students not only understand the cycles of abuse against women, but also how they are represented in literature and other artistic expressions. This is a very sensitive issue and it is challenging to introduce it in the classroom. Feminist theory helps students understand the silencing and marginalization of women, but but to engage them in conversation I also used music and visuals. The activities included classroom discussions and web discussion forums, poster presentations, letter or essay writing, and role playing.

What worked: Students were able to connect literature classics to 21st century life and to a current social issue that affects both the Spanish and the US society. They were very active in the classroom discussion and they also liked the Spanish singer Rosalía, who has a very popular song about gender violence which is inspired in a medieval French novel. Students saw how forgotten writers come to be popular again through music.

What did not work: The exercise about role playing.

What I would do different next time: I would be more clear about expectations for homework assignments (poster presentation and letter/essay writing).