

Engendering Binaries:
The Transhistorical Experiences of Catalina de Erauso

Elizabeth Kuznesof wrote that, “gender...is not a thing in itself.” Rather, “gender is embedded in a complex matrix of other political and social characteristics which influence its manifestations,” (i.e., identity politics vis-a-vis historical socio-cultural contexts). Gender is, like class and ethnicity, socially constructed and in part an issue of performance dependent upon historical context – since socially “embedded characteristics...are not only involved in relationships of gender, but are themselves gendered.” The crossdressing Basque Monja Alferéz (Lieutenant Nun) Catalina de Erauso (1592-1650) offers a compelling case study that demonstrates that gender performance iconography, and symbolism are rooted in the way people experience and interact with the performer and their performance within the archetypal standards of their contexts. By the same token, it is also important to maintain the relative contexts of the past against anachronistic understandings of gender performance and interpretation, in this case relating to Catalina de Erauso’s historical representation in an academic and popular sphere.¹

Consideration of long-standing and novel Iberian and trans-Atlantic Spanish traditions during Erauso’s life is vital in understanding the culture Erauso lived in and how culture impacted their performance and people’s perceptions of them (Erauso).² As the main primary source is Erauso’s memoir, literary analysis and comparisons to other literature during the *Siglo de Oro* (Spanish Golden Age), including the Spanish Baroque period, are worth examining since the canon flourished during the early years of the Spanish empire. Moreover, Spanish Baroque art and existing portraits of Erauso during the period offer another vital ground in understanding elite perceptions of Erauso in their time. While the authorship of the book is unknown, and the

¹ Elizabeth Kuznesof, “The House, the Street and the Brothel: Gender in Latin American History,” in *History of Women in the Americas* 1:1 (2013), 17. doi:10.14296/hwa.v1i1.1686.

² There is no doubt in my mind that Erauso was a man. In choosing to utilize the gender-neutral pronouns they/them/theirs when referencing Catalina de Erauso, I am not attempting to negate Erauso’s masculinity. I am consciously referencing towards Erauso with gender-neutral pronouns to highlight that gender is a socio-cultural construct, Erauso’s radical transgression of genders, and resolve any reader’s contentions or conflation of biological sex with gender.

distinction between the text being a nonfiction account or narrative fiction of a person's life is nebulous, *Lazarillo de Tormes* offers significant insights about Iberian *hidalguía*, specifically wealth, honor, socio-economic class relations, gender relations between men and women, and social perceptions, in Spain during the sixteenth century from the point of view of a poor orphan boy. Iberian Spanish society's attitudes about wealth and the intrinsically linked socio-economic concept of honor are especially present in Lazaro's relationship with his third master, the *Escudero* who presents himself as having elite standing through regal dress although he is in fact penniless, starving, and exiled from his home province for not having adhered out of pride to the customs of the petty nobility (*hidalgos*). The plot of the *Escudero* centers on the gendered social behaviors and expectations given and received by the masculine *hidalgo* class as well as their condemned transgressions evident in the *Escudero*'s attempts to hide his poverty and hunger during his exile under the pretext of religious fasting while in public, including in the presence of elite women.³ Overall, the chapter not only illustrates but underscores the Catholic piety, wealth, class-based customs, and relationships between men and women expected of *hidalgo* men that informed their relationships with others through such customs as courting women and showing reverence in public space to other *hidalgo* men.⁴ The literary classification of *Lazarillo de Tormes* as a narrative testimony is two: an epistolary and picaresque novel. However akin to being a testimony of a person's life, these genre categorizations differ in the classification and reception of their central figure. The picaresque canon situates the main character as a *picaro* or anti-hero who, in the end, transgresses social mores/norms to obtain material success, given his

³ “De cómo Lázaro se asentó con un escudero, y lo que pasó con él,” in *Abriendo Puertas: Ampliando Perspectivas*, ed. Wayne Scott Bowen and Bonnie Tucker Bowen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 121-128. Admittedly and granted, while *Lazarillo de Tormes* was initially published in 1554, decades before Erazo was born or detailed their events in the New World, *Lazarillo de Tormes* is considered a seminal text of the picaresque genre and exhibits the long-standing Iberian cultural conventions of gendered *hidalguia* (faith, masculinity, wealth, performance and perception) which are parallel to Erazo's text.

⁴ “De cómo Lázaro se asentó con un escudero,” 113-118.

low place in society at birth – in Lazaro's case begging, deceiving people, and stealing food to survive, all socially deemed dishonorable actions.⁵

Throughout the literature surrounding Catalina de Erauso, scholars label them as a picaresque figure but do not explore the literary canon in their analysis.⁶ Nonetheless, a synthetic analysis of Erauso's testimony and the picaresque canon embodied in *Lazarillo de Tormes* situates the Iberian social concepts of *machismo* and *hidalguía* as assessments of the impact of Erauso's gendered performance on those around them in a similar way as the *Escudero* in *Lazarillo de Tormes* attempts to present himself as an archetypal *hidalgo* and fixates his anxieties on society's perceptions of him and assessment of his identity politics (wealth, social standing, and honor). Yet, among scholars, Catalina de Erauso's testimony is compared more frequently to the genre of *relación de méritos y servicios* as a legal document.⁷

Catalina de Erauso recounts their merits in their memoir. The text served as a legal document directed to the Spanish crown during the reign of Felipe IV to petition for an award for their services in the New World. They (Erauso) recount in detail their military ventures in fighting Indigenous peoples in the Southern Cone of the Viceroyalty of Peru.⁸ Moreover, Erauso takes pride in assuming the traditionally associated masculine virtues of aggression and valor to a fault, highlighting their repeated violent encounters with men over gambling discrepancies and sexual insults, informed by their masculine ego.⁹ Relations with women are also present, with Erauso narrating women's attraction to them. While Erauso does not explain their sexuality or

⁵ *Ibid.*, 118-121.

⁶ See Jason Stinnett, “New World Masculinity: The Lieutenant Nun—Hyperbole or Reality?,” in *Confluencia* 35:1 (2019), 3. doi:10.1353/cnf.2019.0001. Matthew Goldmark, “Reading Habits: Catalina de Erauso and the Subjects of Early Modern Spanish Gender and Sexuality,” in *Colonial Latin American Review* 24:2 (2015): 215 and 229. doi:10.1080/10609164.2015.1040278.

⁷ See Goldmark, “Reading Habits,” 215–35.

⁸ Catalina de Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of A Basque Transvestite in the New World*, trans. by Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto (Beacon Press: Boston, 1996), 18-25.

⁹ Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun*, 49-50 and 55-60.

emotions towards women, Erauso entertained courtships in order to obtain wealth and reinforce their caste position in the New World by only pursuing such relationships with *Criollas* and avoiding *Mestizas*, *Indias*, and *Pardas*. Nonetheless, Erauso never indicates a commitment to having relations with any of the women they entertained for socio-economic interests.¹⁰

Scholarship on Erauso is based on the archived legal documents sent to Felipe IV and the Holy See, or their autobiography. Academics scrutinized Erauso's autobiography with other archival documents to present Erauso's unconventional and compelling life in a patriarchal and Catholic empire.¹¹ Moreover, among scholars, much is made of Erauso's sexual tendencies and sexual identity. Erauso's direct testimony, however, does not substantially uphold scholars' perceptions of their private sexual life, since they do not definitively confess their emotions or attraction to women outside of their socio-economic interests. Nonetheless, Erauso's own documented experience gives insight into the gendered-socio-economic standards of the Spanish empire across Iberian Atlantic during the early seventeenth century with the importance placed on their identity politics as a Basque gentleman of middling social position, which required that others provide reverence to them (honor). In Erauso's own words, the embodiment of their Basque criollo hidalgo performance throughout the Spanish empire was successful and legitimized by the Crown and Rome. While scholars can assume arguments in opposition to hetero-patriarchal hegemony, how Erauso felt about their personal gender and sexual identity (i.e., lesbian, trans, or nonbinary) cannot be ascertained definitely from their testimony.

Erauso's artistic representation in their portrait underscores the characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity as Erauso dons military garb and short untamed hair. The physical dimensions, enhanced by the military uniform, present Erauso's figure as broad and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-29.

¹¹ See Goldmark, "Reading Habits," 215-35.

heavy in the shoulders and chest. Moreover, Erauso's facial features are rough, and their countenance is an intense glare without archetypally feminine characteristics but does not inherently indicate Eruaso's biological sex (Fig. 1).¹² Attributed artistic authorship of the portrait *Catalina de Erauso* is disputed between Juan van der Hamen and Francisco Pacheco. Both painters were part of the Spanish Baroque style during the seventeenth century. Without a doubt, an aristocratic patron must have commissioned either artist to paint Erauso. Another similar portrait of Erauso with more feminine details is attributed to Pacheco. Felipe IV, who Erauso claims to have had a friendly relationship with, may well have ordered van der Hamen to paint Erauso during their time in Spain and at court.¹³ Given the masculine details inherent in the portrait, in comparison to other portraits of soldiers, Erauso's masculine performance is immortalized for the exaltation of their dedication, masculine virtues, and military service towards the empire. Because of the expense, notable subjects were mainly the ones to sit for a portrait and preserve their image, noting their social importance.

Attempting to revise scholarship on Erauso, Matthew Goldmark notes the contention between gender and sexuality involved as academics frame Erauso as a (fe)male transgressor and the embodiment of ideal masculinity in Spanish society. In searching for the "true Erauso," Goldmark examines and corroborates archival judicial testimonies of Erauso's contemporaries during Erauso's petition to the Spanish crown. Goldmark remarks that a queer reading that focuses on Erauso's masculine sexual behavior towards women in Erauso's *Vida y sucesos de la Monja Alferéz* is insightful in underscoring Spanish colonial standards of virility, pride, and socio-ethnic caste-based relations and mobility for men in heteronormative patriarchal

¹² Juan van der Hamen, *Catalina de Erauso*, 1626, oil on canvas, Fundación Kutxa, San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa, Spain. https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/a/increible-historia-catalina-erauso-monja-alferez_13152.

¹³ Lilian H. Zirpolo, Review of *Juan van der Hamen y León and the Court of Madrid*, in *Renaissance Quarterly* 59:4 (2006), 1211-1212. doi:10.1353/ren.2008.0560.

relationships (notwithstanding or regardless of Erauso's female biological sex). Nonetheless, arguments about Erauso's emotions are highly subjective and rooted in an academic's perception of Erauso because the information Erauso provides about their intimate private sexual emotions or commitment towards women is not definitive.

Thus, rather than base his analysis on Erauso's gender performance in their autobiography, Goldmark prioritizes contemporary testimonies of witnesses deposed for their petition. While such testimony is formulaic and focused on corroborating Erauso's honor (merits and service), the witnesses are not hostile to Erauso but reveal that Erauso was generally recognized as a man in the eyes of those they encountered. Furthermore, these testimonies (all from men?) likewise raise the difficulty of truly knowing Erauso, given the revelation that they (Erauso) are biologically female.¹⁴ The point being made here is not that Erauso is not a man, but rather that regardless of embodying masculine standards, binary biology of male and female came to overshadow and undermine peoples' perceptions of Erauso (in the same spirit Elizabeth Kuzenof's quote mentioned at the beginning of this paper). Yet, Erauso's performance also highlights their agency in constructing their own masculine gendered performance by concealing their female biology to further enhance that performance. In a manner of speaking, Erauso's performance is an issue of consent, which they dictated through self-presentation regardless of biology. Overall, Goldmark concludes that perceptions of Erauso relied upon their behavior (*habitos*), which Erauso convincingly engendered in the eyes of their contemporaries.¹⁵

Goldmark's scrutiny and contextualization of perceptions about Erauso's gender performance in the New World raise the question: who exactly was Catalina de Erauso? Performance, in this case of gender, can be a conscious process of (re)presenting oneself to the

¹⁴ Goldmark, "Reading Habits," 215–217.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 217-226.

world. What an individual displays or indicates to the public is shaped by speech, actions, and clothing. In effect, the Erauso that their contemporaries knew differed from the Erauso revealed to contemporaries in the court proceedings with the revelation of Erauso's biological sex.¹⁶ That is, the perception of Erauso's contemporaries distinguished between a male and female, masculine and feminine, Erauso. Sex notwithstanding, Erauso maintained the esteem of their comrades. Erauso preserved their perceived honor - military merit, Basque heritage, female virginity, and wealth. As for recovering a "true Erauso," a public persona is to some degree fabricated, which can be seen in the case of Erauso, who affected people's perceptions of them by highlighting their masculinity and hiding their biology. Erauso and their performance must be assessed using the evidence and contexts of their historical situation, including their actions, writings, and peer testimonies. Looking back from the present, Erauso's performance warrants speculation from different theoretical foundations in an attempt to understand gender relations against hetero-patriarchal hegemony, but Erauso does not live in the present context.

Considering Erauso's more contemporary reception, Richard A. Gordon shows how the Mexican government under Manuel Avila Camacho misconstrued and sanitized Catalina de Erauso's more transgressive attributes as a sexually ambiguous transgender person to a heteronormative woman hiding in masculine dress in the film *La monja alferéz* (1944) to fit a present patriarchal ideological context to reinforce Mexican gender norms after the Mexican Revolution. Produced during Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema (*Época de Oro del Cine Mexicano*), Emilio Gonzalez Muriel directed the film and the famous Mexican actress Maria Felix personified Catalina de Erauso.¹⁷ At the time, the Mexican government subsidized the film industry and regulated scripts to contribute toward the construction of a national identity after the

¹⁶ Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun*, 61-69.

¹⁷ Richard A. Gordon, "The Domestication of the Ensign Nun: 'La Monja Alférez' (1944) and Mexican Identity," in *Hispania* 87:4 (2004), 675-676. doi:10.2307/20140872.

Revolution of 1910-1920. Straying from the *Vida i sucesos de la monja alferéz* (1625), in the 1944 film *Catalina de Erauso* is not a colonial Iberian of Basque heritage but a criollo of New Spain. The film centers on heteronormative standards of gender relations in Mexico by distorting the memorial so that Maria Felix's Erauso is committed to a childhood male suitor and love interest, with crossdressing being one way for her to achieve their union against family opposition. According to Gordon, the film, under the commercial management of the state, effectively reimagines *Catalina de Erauso* as a Mexican colonial symbol and icon for political hegemony and nationalism evident with the presence of Catholicism as a traditional governing institution in the New World along with the sanctioned Catholic marital norms between men and women in light of the reconciliation of Mexico's secular and anticlerical Constitution of 1917 and the Catholic Church under Manuel Avila Camacho's administration after the *Cristero* Rebellion.¹⁸ The gender construction intended by the film's producers, in this case the Mexican government, reinforced traditional heterosexual Mexican gender relations in-line with patriarchal Catholic tradition.

The construction of *Catalina de Erauso* as an arguably more traditionally Catholic and feminine figure in Muriel's film produces a different experience of Erauso for a twentieth-century audience than the sexually ambiguous transgender person with masculine virtues and deemed a man by Pope Urban VIII and Felipe IV presented in the seventeenth century sources.¹⁹ Rather, when the contention between biological sex and gender performance becomes the main plot it reinforces traditional hetero-patriarchal impressions and perceptions of Erauso as a woman, as opposed to their historical transgressive performance as a socially accepted Catholic man with traditionally masculine violent virtues, sexually ambiguous

¹⁸ Gordon, "The Domestication of the Ensign Nun," 676-679.

¹⁹ Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun*, 73-79.

behavior, and masculine dress. In comparison to Erauso's contemporaries, the film's audience knows Erauso's undisclosed biology - something which Erauso's peers did not know when they interacted with them. In effect, the presentist interpretation and construction of Erauso by Manuel Avila Camacho's conservative government and their twentieth-century audience is anachronistic to Catalina de Erauso's historical nature, context, and situational perception, even as it highlights the role time and place (sociocultural context) factor in constructing and perceiving gender.

Jason Stinnett argues that an assessment of Erauso's performance of masculinity must not be anachronistic in defining Erauso's sexuality based on a scholar's perception, since this invalidates Erauso's agency in the matter because there is no definitive indication from Erauso themselves in their self-identification of such an intimate private affair. Instead, the contemporaries who perceived Erauso, as described in *Historia de la monja alferez, Catalina de Erauso, escrita por ella misma*, legitimized Erauso's masculine performance.²⁰ In chapters where Erauso documents their violent confrontations with men and relations with women, Erauso convincingly personified gendered socio-economic and political expectations within their culture. In effect, New World Spanish society, both men and women, recognized Erauso as a man regardless of Erauso's biological sex because of their culturally masculine behavior (i.e., speech, action, and dress).²¹ Stinnett agrees with Goldmark's argument that scholarly interpretations of Erauso should be rooted in their (Erauso's) peers' perceptions of their gender performance.

Stinnett distinguishes between European and New World culture concerning the importance of ethnic-*hidalgo* social status, yet he overlooks the mercantile nature of Spanish America, including culture.²² In doing so, Stinnet implies that the role that social status played in

²⁰ Stinnett, "New World Masculinity," 2-5 and 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4-8.

²² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

the configuration and perception of honor waned in Iberia, but remained and hardened in the colonial New World. Such an observation may be in line with the reading of *Lazarillo de Tormes* as a work that exalts picaresque virtues for social mobility against established Spanish social norms in Iberia but not the New World colonies. Thus, the New World colonies of Spain were more dominated by traditional social perception and conventions than Iberia. While there is a dissonance between actual social behavior and ideals, *Lazarillo de Tormes* still outlines the ideal *hidalgo* at the time, against the backdrop of changing early modern period which created a greater dissonance in Spanish Iberia than the Spanish Americas. Moreover, Stinnett argues that the fantastical nature of Erauso's narrative with their propensity to engage in frequent armed skirmishes with other men out of pride and honor is more akin to the truth than hyperbolic fiction. First, one of the extremes (that Erauso's text is hyperbolic) implies a devaluation of Erauso's words because of their radical transgression and praise by their peers. Furthermore, the blurring of the lines between reality and fiction in Erauso's milieu and their contemporaries' testimonies is akin to *Lazarillo de Tormes* but nonetheless reveals the socio-cultural norms Erauso understood, navigated, and engendered.²³

Situating Erauso's testimony between two opposed categories is problematic. Rather, it is plausible that Erauso hyperbolized their actions to receive material recognition for their merits and services to the Spanish empire. While Erauso may have needed to assert their masculinity to a higher degree than others, including in their autobiography (i.e., "overcompensate"), it by no means discredits their masculine performance because their contemporaries and imperial authorities (Felipe IV and Pope Urban VIII) recognized Erauso as a man.²⁴ On the contrary,

²³ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

²⁴ Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun*, 73-79.

Erauso's understanding of gender roles in their words and actions speaks to Erauso's efforts to embody a masculine persona successfully for their peers, garnering their esteem and sanction.

Credit must be given to Erauso where credit is due. They actively embodied Spanish male social characteristics within their contexts in the New World during the seventeenth century effectively out of their own will and recognized by their (Erauso's) peers. Their masculine virtues of Catholic piety and monarchical support even provided them (Erauso) social sanction by the Spanish Crown and Vatican. In all senses of the term, Erauso was a transgender person. Regardless of biological female sex, they (Erauso) were a man insofar as they engendered socially constructed masculine archetypes and standards of the Spanish colonial empire including violence, gender relations between men and women, Catholic piety, and monarchical devotion. Erauso lived all of these and their peers recognized the masculine persona that Erauso incarnated in order to be perceived as such. As the adage goes, “to be is to be perceived,” which must also be respected today by present audiences of the historical Monja Alferéz’s gender performance.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Hamen, Juan van der. *Catalina de Erauso*. 1626. Oil on canvas. Fundación Kutxa, San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa, Spain.
https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/a/increible-historia-catalina-erauso-monja-alferez_13152 (accessed December 18, 2022).