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Underestimating Women in the Early Modern Atlantic World

Lindsey Bauman

This essay examines the limiting gender roles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as depicted through the detailed account of Catalina de Erauso, a Spanish woman who ran away from a convent. Disguising herself as a man, our character eventually journeyed to Chile, joined the militia, and took part in fighting against the native peoples of the region. Noted as being an exemplary warrior in the midst of battle, she was not detected as a woman until she exposed herself. By taking historical context into account, this essay argues that patriarchal society's view of women is what enabled Catalina de Erauso to impersonate a man so successfully. As women were stereotyped as characteristically similar and, therefore, interchangeable, they were underestimated and overlooked in these roles.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the stereotypes associated with gender were extremely restrictive in Europe. Women were limited to the domestic sphere and expected to uphold the proper characteristics of femininity, while men were allowed more freedom in their actions and movement within public society. Authors and historians DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook have pointed out that “the cult of true womanhood dictated that women always appear demure, submissive, pious, and concerned only with home and family” (3). Through the endorsement of institutions and ideologies, these roles impacted everyday life. Patriarchal society, in which a group of people were controlled by men, severely limited the life choices of women. In a time when their opportunities were so incredibly limited, a select few women were able to step outside the boundaries that patriarchal society had set for them by impersonating men. One of these exceptional cases is Catalina de Erauso's, a notorious fugitive nun who ran away from a convent at the age of fifteen years old. She disguised herself as a man, constantly moving herself across Spain in order to hide her true identity. At eighteen, she traveled to the New World, eventually ending up in Chile, enlisting in the militia, and fighting against the native

peoples of the region (“Autobiography”). Using Catalina’s story, narrated in her alleged autobiography and other contemporary sources, I argue that limiting gender roles and perceptions during the early modern period led to women being underestimated by both men and women themselves, ultimately allowing cross-dressing women to remain undetected for long periods of time {1}.

The question of how women have been able to portray themselves so successfully as men has been a constant source of interest for historians. There have been many cases of women cross-dressing over the course of many different periods of history, taking on the guise of men for varied reasons. A few popular examples include, Hua Mulan, an ancient Chinese woman, who fought in the army in her father’s place and was featured in a famous ballad (Lan) and Frances Louisa Clayton, an American woman, who fought for the Union during the Civil War (Blanton and Cook). For many, cross-dressing was a way to gain autonomy, whether in the form of the accumulation of wealth or the freedom of movement within society. They could travel the world or work for wages they were able to keep for themselves, without the constant limitations placed on them by men. It was a “private rebellion against [the] public conventions,” which patriarchal society held so dear (Blanton and Cook 5). The fact that women could emulate the roles typically associated with men so well, or at least well enough to spend many years at a time in disguise, makes historians question how this was possible. The uncertainty around this subject fascinates a wide variety of people, whether they are historians or those within the general public, and makes this a very relevant question to attempt to answer. Catalina’s story was also incredibly popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, circulating the early modern world and being reprised in theater productions and a Diego de Rosales’ *General History of Chile*

(Adams 51). It must also be noted that, while Catalina's story, as well as stories with a similar theme, are incredibly interesting, they are not the personification of normal circumstances within society. Catalina is the exception, not the norm.

The main facts of Catalina's autobiography, such as her military record and the injuries she sustained while serving, can be verified by court documents that were recorded when Catalina attempted to gain her military pension. As a woman from a land-owning family, the expectations placed on her by her family would have differed from those of lower-class standing. Not supposed to be an active participant in the economy, her duty would have been to marry or become a nun. At the age of four, the choice was taken away from her when her father placed her in a convent with a dowry, implying that he had a higher social standing as he had the economic means to do so. Not content with the life laid out for her, she staged her own escape. After making herself a pair of pants and a shirt from the clothes on her back, as well as cutting off her hair, her incredible journey began ("Autobiography" Chapter I). She held a multitude of positions, including a tutor's apprentice, mule driver, and valet, until she traveled to the West Indies in 1603 (Adams 46-47). She worked as a shopkeeper and merchant, as well as learned to use a sword during her first few years in Latin America before enlisting in the militia and serving in Chile. Following her military career, she became involved in a violent brawl and her arrest was ordered. Catalina retreated to a church, where she met and befriended a bishop, who she eventually revealed her secret identity to. He spoke up for her and she was released, becoming well-known as "the Nun/Ensign" (Adams 48-51). She eventually returned to Spain, sought out and was awarded her military pension, and returned to the West Indies to live out the rest of her days transporting goods and people by mule train (Adams 52).

However, the autobiography itself does have some limitations. There is not much information given concerning her multiple stays in convents, which makes it more difficult for readers to empathize with her experiences there. Some sections, particularly the ones that cannot be corroborated by court documents, could have been embellished or exaggerated in order to gain more empathy or better dissuade those who doubt her story. There is also a certain questionability of authorship when regarding the piece, as it was not published until an estimated 150 years after the fact.

Despite these uncertainties and drawbacks, this story has been examined by many historians in many ways, such as an analysis of representations created concerning her transgendered state (Velasco). Her sexual identity has been examined through the evaluation of potential internal and external motivations for Catalina's impersonation. For instance, rather than just focusing on societal limitation as the leading reason behind her decision to take on a man's characteristics, Mendieta looks at the personal reasons that could have potentially been behind it (165-200). Her transformation into a more well-known icon has been scrutinized as well, especially after revealing her true identity to a bishop. Catalina claimed that following those events, "she was 'forever known as The Nun/Ensign'" (Adams 51). Other scholars have looked at Catalina's story from the perspective of contradictions between her gender and the role she eventually took on (Merrim 177-78). Her impact is so strong that she was even included in a book about women who served during the American Civil War. Blanton and Cook cited Catalina as being "the first documented case of a woman in the Americas disguising herself as a man" and use her as a potential influence for the women who themselves impersonated men and fought for the

Confederacy and the Union (5). Women have largely been unrepresented in the historical field until more recently, but it is apparent that Catalina's story has certainly resonated.

Experts in the field have also studied gender norms of this period, as well as the stereotypes that stemmed from them, many times over. One of the most prominent sources of information concerning gender in the early modern period is *The Return of Martin Guerre* by Natalie Zemon Davis. This text provided information and analysis regarding the gender roles of women in sixteenth-century France. It also helped pin down the ways in which women were allowed, or not allowed, to move within society (Zemon Davis). At the same time, *The Return of Martin Guerre* also showcased a level of uncertainty found in people's identities throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the book, Arnaud du Tilh impersonated Martin after Guerre had an extended absence from home. Arnaud masqueraded as Martin throughout Guerre's own village, even going so far as to have children with Bertrande, Martin's wife (Zemon Davis). Today, it is easy enough to have a DNA test done to ascertain what is true or false, but this kind of certainty was not able to be obtained in the mid-1500s. By allowing readers a glimpse of such confusion, it is easier to understand how Catalina, and other cross-dressers and impersonators, were able to successfully fulfill their role.

Religion has been examined as well, especially concerning the Renaissance and Reformation and how they influenced certain stereotypes of women (Karant-Nunn 175-201). The notion of private and public spheres within society have also been extensively explored (Wiesner, "Beyond Women" 311-321). Each of these sources gave historical context to the roles associated with gender, enabling readers to better understand why, in extreme cases, women

wanted to and succeeded in cross-dress successfully. While there have been many readings of Catalina's story, including those through the lens of sexual orientation and sexual identity, this reading focuses more on the opportunities cross-dressing offered her as a woman. Differing from the works listed previously, this essay proposes that the gender-based spheres and their corresponding roles helped create and promote limiting stereotypes and led to the increased likelihood of women being underestimated by men, as well as by other women. This underestimation ultimately allowed women to abandon traditional roles without being suspected for doing so.

In general, women of her social standing became undervalued during the early modern period largely because they were relegated to domestic work {2}. Many daily tasks came to be identified with a certain gender. As most of their work was considered to be unpaid household chores, women's work "began to be thought of as private, domestic, and reproductive, whereas men's work – even work exactly the same as women's, such as sewing clothes – was understood to be productive" (Wiesner, "Spinning out Capital" 207). Religion also played a role in limiting women to the domestic sphere. Protestants closed convents, which were one of the only alternatives to marriage available to women, in order to place a larger emphasis on running a household and having a family. Catholics did similarly, "holding up the 'holy family' as a model" for their followers (Hardwick 349). Religion seemed to give the sense that this was a God-given role within society, one which women were supposed to accept and uphold.

All of these factors, placing importance on a domestic lifestyle, may have led to the conclusion by many, men and women alike, that this was the only type of position women were capable of.

This level of underestimation may have been a key reason many women, disguised as men, went undetected for large amounts of time. In the case of Catalina de Erauso, she led anything but a domestic life while aspiring to the respectability awarded to those in the upper levels of European society. Although her knowledge of domestic tasks, such as sewing, helped her to disguise herself, she did not allow herself to be limited by it (“Autobiography” Chapter VI). Catalina used these skills as a cloak with which to better hide herself as she took on the guise of a man. Rather than fulfill the stereotypes associated with femininity, she portrayed herself as aggressive in public. There were numerous instances where she used her swordsmanship to protect herself, such as when she was rushed by an armed man in Piscobamba (“Autobiography” Chapter XII). Ultimately, these personifications of stereotypically masculine traits may have helped her remain disguised for so long. While in the militia, they also may have convinced her superiors to promote her to more public and commanding roles, many of which were over men (“Autobiography” Chapter VI-VII). Going against traditional gender roles for someone of her class and ethnicity, she served as a lieutenant in the Chilean Wars for five years before being promoted to “deputy to the sergeant-major” (“Autobiography” Chapter VI-VII). Overall, her lack of domesticity is what helped allow her to successfully portray herself as a man.

Along with being undervalued for a domestic lifestyle, women were also perceived as being weak in both body and mind. Guilds, or organizations for specific types of merchants or craftsmen, were prominent during this time, but most excluded women from membership even though wives and daughters usually had some role within the businesses (Hardwick 347). Their reasoning often revolved around the idea that “women were unfit for certain tasks, such as glass cutting, because they were too clumsy or ‘unskilled,’ yet those same women made lace, a job

that required an even higher level of dexterity and concentration than glass-cutting” (Wiesner, “Spinning out Capital” 208). Here again is an example of underestimating women due to the stereotypes regarding their lack of advanced manual skills.

In the case of Catalina, she clearly shows physical strength and aptitude, particularly within an account in the autobiography during a battle with the natives in Chile. It reads:

They killed many of our troops and officers, including my lieutenant, and made off with our flag. Seeing it borne away, myself and two other mounted soldiers ran after it, right into the middle of the mob, trampling, killing, and receiving some damage. Soon, one of our three fell dead. The two of us pressed on and reached the flag, but my comrade was felled by a spear. Now badly wounded in the leg, I killed the chief who carried the flag, took it from him, and spurred my horse on...But I was badly hurt, pierced by three arrows and a spear in my left shoulder, which I sorely felt. Finally I made it back to my own people and fell right off my horse. (“Autobiography” Chapter VI)

While the amount of trampling and killing may be exaggerated, the account of Catalina fighting bravely and becoming badly wounded in this specific instance can be corroborated by both the verdict and testimony pieces. Catalina’s superior officer in the militia, Don Fransisco Perez De Navarrete, mentioned this in his testimony regarding the request for her pension, stating “I always saw her as a good soldier, attending to what she was ordered with great punctuality, and she was treated as a man for always displaying bravery” (“Testimony”). Because she showed these abilities, she would not have been suspected of being a woman, the gender which was supposed to be more weak and fragile. This was apparent in the way the bishop, Don Fray Agustin de Carabaxal, was astounded to find out Catalina’s sex after she admitted her identity and told him about her escapades. He was so disbelieving that he made two midwives examine her to be sure that she was a woman (“Autobiography” Chapter XX).

Hand-in-hand with a perceived weakness in body was a perceived weakness in mind, or lack of intelligence. Humanists set out to convince women themselves to not seek out education, claiming it was only necessary for those who would eventually need to find careers. They believed that only upper-class women should seek out higher education (Wiesner, “Spinning out Capital” 208). Women were not being properly educated due to institutions, run by men, and humanists, who supported male education and did not encourage female education. This would only create a perpetual cycle of undereducated women, prolonging the downward spiral of opportunities available to them.

The very first time the reader meets Catalina, she displays a fierce strength of mind. Her plot to escape the convent was borne of extreme improvisation and intelligence, as she used her time in her aunt’s cell to gain later access to the keys of the convent. By leaving the door unlocked, she gave herself the opportunity to return, take the keys and supplies, and leave the convent. The autobiography claimed that she hid herself away for three days, taking the time to make herself men’s clothing and cutting her hair before setting off (“Autobiography” Chapter I). Catalina may have also had a better ability to find and adapt to different occupations, such as accounting, writing, and representing herself in court, than, perhaps, other women in the same position due to the education she had gained at the convent, as well as her own ingenuity (Adams 46). She clearly showed that she was extremely knowledgeable and resourceful, especially when placed in a leadership role within the militia. However, due to the ascribed gender norms of the time, men would have been more likely to view women as uneducated and would not have guessed that such an intelligent person could be female.

Being submissive was also another characteristic associated with women during the early modern period. Religion played a large role in this, trying to depict men and women as containing crucial qualities based on gender. Hardwick evaluated this trend, particularly focusing on the changes that were made during reformation. Within Protestantism and Catholicism, she found that women's roles were increasingly limited. At one point, she states, "...wives in the Christian households that emerged as a new foci for reformed faiths were partners, but obedient and submissive ones. Husbands and fathers were the leaders" (Hardwick 349). Religious pressures influenced women to be submissive in order to show respect to the male figures in their lives, such as fathers and husbands. It was seen as a way to compliment them and to do otherwise was a deliberate insult.

Society itself tried to impose similarly on women, forcing them to be dependent on male figures through a more political approach. "The legal status of an adult woman depended on whether she was unmarried, married, or widowed" (Wiesner, "Spinning out Capital" 209). As unmarried women, they were often seen as a financial burden on their male guardian, whether it was a father or brother, if they still lived with the family. Married, they became reliant on their husbands. Ultimately, women had no legal identity as a person; they were their father's property, then their husband's (Wiesner, "Spinning out Capital 209"). The only slim chance for a woman to escape dependency was to join a convent or become widowed and be left well-off by her husband.

Catalina showed herself as quite independent right from the beginning of her journey. Through her memoirs, Adams argued, "By the time Erauso was a 15-year-old novice, it was clear she was

more headstrong than holy” (45). In order to impersonate a man, she ran away from a convent. In doing so, she rejected her father’s wishes for her to remain there (“Autobiography” Chapter I). Arguably the only time Catalina presented herself as fulfilling these stereotypes was when she knelt before the Lord Bishop. Feeling as though she was kneeling before God at the same time, she stated, “It made me feel small” (“Autobiography” Chapter XX). Perhaps this mindset harkened back to her childhood, having lived in a convent since the age of four (“Autobiography” Chapter I).

The verdict of her pension hearing also portrayed her as self-reliant while in a military setting. It categorized her as giving an “honorable and outstanding service” while in the “heart of war” (“Verdict”). In order to fulfill these perceptions, Catalina would have been unable to fulfill the stereotype of being submissive or meek. She would have had to follow orders given by her superiors, but she would have had to show her own leadership skills while in action, especially once she was promoted to ensign and, eventually, captain of her company (Adams 49). There was no one there to do her job for her; she would have had to have been independent enough to do it herself. For Philip IV, King of Spain, to extend such a judgment towards a woman is extremely significant (Adams 52). To admit such virtues were found within Catalina was to undermine the established gender roles and patriarchal society as a whole.

Throughout this essay the claim has been made that women were undervalued during this period in history, but some may argue that is not true. Hardwick in particular notes this when saying:

Women’s contributions were varied but absolutely essential...Nothing shows the value of women’s contribution to the family economy more than the speed with which widowed men remarried – usually within a matter of months. Rural families were usually highly cash-poor, meaning that the money women’s work provided – whether selling eggs and

dairy or serving as wet-nurses for the babies of urban families – was enormously valuable. (Hardwick 346)

It is certainly true that women brought two additional hands to a marriage, giving men another person to help sustain the household. But at the same time, this statement reduced women to their reproductive capabilities and domestic work. Women, while valued for an additional source of financial help, were still being undervalued as people and as having capabilities besides those which society assigned to them. Those in positions of power helped corroborate this, focusing on their capabilities only within these domestic roles. They were loath to admit that women had an aptitude in the workforce, particularly in occupations that held similar demands, such as making lace (Wiesner, “Spinning out Capital” 208). It is the argument of this thesis that the expectations associated with domesticity and weakness not only led to an underestimation of women’s abilities, but also to a blinder effect, which resulted in women not being seen as capable of anything else.

Overall, perceptions and stereotypes of women, enforced through the power of laws and customs, led to the underestimation of an entire sex. Although Catalina’s actions of disguise were an exception to the norm, her story seems to help prove this argument; she was able to conceal her identity as a woman, a gender that embodied traits which society stereotypically perceived to be completely separate from all characteristics associated with men. Through challenging the norms of the period by cross-dressing and dismantling the boundaries that society placed on women, Catalina was able to “escape her own personal convent” (Adams 50). But patriarchal society, represented by King Philip IV, did not easily accept this. Catalina was awarded her military pension, but the verdict also stated that “it will be proper for her to be back in women’s clothes” (“Verdict”). By attempting to reinstate the gender norms that she cast

aside, it also attempted to force her back into the neat little restrictive boxes that acted as stereotypes. Catalina ignored this portion of the verdict though and continued her life as a muleteer, another occupation dominated by men, until her death (Adams 53). She had successfully escaped the constricting limitations that were so often placed on women and continued to evade them for the rest of her life.

Notes

{1} In order to help readers step into Catalina de Erauso's shoes, so to speak, and create an intimate, empathetic connection between them and our character, I will be addressing Catalina de Erauso by her first name for the duration of the essay.

{2} "Other historical studies on the participation of women in the economy show that lower-class women, and perhaps even more so indigenous women in the Americas, had important economic roles outside of the domestic sphere" (Amílcar Challú, personal communication).

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