

Sign(ature)s of the Invisible: The Ideologies of *Historia de la monja alférez*

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“Únicamente su mano podría hacer dudar de su sexo, porque es llena y carnosa, aunque robusta y fuerte, y el ademán, que, todavía, algunas veces tiene un no sé qué de femenino.”¹

The Disambiguation of a Spectacle

In a letter dated 1626, Rome, the traveler Pedro del Valle makes this symptomatic observance about his contemporary Catalina de Erauso, the famed crossdressed lieutenant nun and alleged writer of a book of memoirs, *Historia de la monja alférez*, which surveys her endeavors and vicissitudes against the backdrop of Spain's imperial enterprise in the Americas as well as the Empire's desperate efforts to preserve its hegemony in Europe in an age of counter-reform. Del Valle's impression of Catalina suggests that her masculine dress and demeanor co-exist with "un no sé qué de femenino." Indeed, in accord with del Valle's estimation, she is masculine and feminine all at once, "llena y carnosa aunque robusta y fuerte." Although not much is known about del Valle from the letter, the fact that he has come to know Catalina through his friend, and compatriot of Catalina, Father Rodrigo de San Miguel suggests his relation to constituted authority. Del Valle first learns of her story while traveling in India. In other words, he does not familiarize himself with Catalina through direct acquaintance, but is informed by Catalina's celebrity. Del Valle's reaction to Catalina represents, one might say, an already codified

response to the extent that the sight of her ceases to scandalize. That the image in question appears to be perfectly tolerable for del Valle raises questions, since the reverse ought to be true for anybody writing from the perspective of Aristotelian Scholasticism, the philosophical foundation of the established Church doctrine of the time as set out, for example, in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. For this reason, del Valle's 'indifference' to Catalina begs the question: why does he abide by her androgyny, so to speak, conceiving male and female as an ensemble rather than a difference, when reproof would be more appropriate from this Scholastic point of view? Why does the literal image of the body in question signify this way, when it ought to contradict itself? The explanation can only be found in a complex social conjuncture in the throes of ideological struggle.

Reservations about the image of Erauso call to mind the matter of interpretation, which is germane to a debated theme in *Historia de la monja alférez*,² namely that of her mutation. Erauso's life, though apparently an anomaly with respect to the prescribed feminine behavior of her day, is also an anomaly *for* her narrative—an assertion I will hold in abeyance and explain in due course. In the meantime, I will advance that the matter of transformation is one to be charted not in some abstract 'will to power,' but in the discursive conditions of possibility embodied in the very language of the text. To this effect, contrary to what occurs in much of the current scholarship on Erauso, I want to suggest that the problem is radically different from that which can be articulated by the model of a transgression, in quite essentialist or universalist terms.³

The assortment of *Historia's* modern editions attests to lingering ecdotic problems that naturally need to be sorted out for a reading that is characterized by in-depth exegetical

rigor. However, the existence of philological quandaries should not preclude a reading that assumes that *Historia de la monja alférez* is steeped in the ideological conditions that arise in Spain's transition from feudalism to mercantilism beginning in the 14th to 16th centuries and the ideological struggles that, though inaugurated therein, will remain part of the Spanish landscape for a protracted period of time. That the text of *Historia de la monja alférez*, attributed to Catalina de Erauso, is based on a lost manuscript, presumably dating from the 1600's (1625 or 1626), and that the existing modern edition derives from an 1784 Madrid manuscript set to print in 1829, poses no obstacle to this sort of reading, for there is always the text's objective inscription in history. Since the text can be analyzed in terms of its internal logic (the relation of its key notions and themes to a particular ideological problematic), one cannot rule out the possibility of a correspondence between the lost original and the 1784 manuscript. Even if the 18th century manuscript were to represent a further elaboration or re-elaboration of the lost original, it would not be one that diverged significantly *in terms of its ideological horizon*, for in the case of Spain, I insist, the struggle between feudalizing forces and their mercantile counterparts vying for hegemony is a lengthy affair. At any rate, I will be arguing that the peculiarity of *Historia* lies in its own articulation of the mingling of two dominant ideological matrices, explicitly animism and substantialism,⁴ and that the *form* of the text, a linear narrative, reveals an attempt by established power to recast Catalina's autobiography along more conventional lines.

An understanding of these matrices, along with some more general thoughts that I will offer regarding ideology, is absolutely crucial in order to understand how the contradictions figure in *Historia*. Without the concepts of animism and substantialism,

the text's real contradictions could easily be overlooked. As the ideological matrix of feudal relations substantialism presupposes several conditions, including: the inextricability of body and soul; that things have a natural place; that all movement is towards repose; that persons are an expression of their blood or lineage; and that a benevolent God hierarchically orders the world. A corollary to the latter thought is the idea that the sublunary world is the mirror image, albeit imperfect, of the celestial world. By contrast, animism, or the ideological matrix of mercantile relations, assumes body/soul duality: that is, a soul that is not marred by the actions of the body but still expresses itself in the body; the perpetuity of movement; and the person as a "free" individual or subject. The text, I argue, has no speech beyond these two matrices and cannot exist but by virtue of them. In the transition from feudalism to the first capitalist formation, the impact of bourgeois social relations was to make possible new forms of thought, new ways to write and live. But in order to fully appreciate this, one must consider that social relations, of whatever kind, be they master/slave, lord/serf, or our existing Subject/subject relation, exude ideology as a natural emission of their own interconnectedness. The basic presuppositions of an ideology are later elaborated by those through and for whom it lives, the effect of which is to legitimate those relations and act to solidify their performance. As a natural upshot from concrete social relations, ideology is a manifestation of class power. However, since ideology precedes all individuation, it is unconscious, and hence, more than the patrimony of the dominant class, it subsumes the whole social formation and acts as the ground for all social being. Moreover, only if one accepts ideology as unconscious can one understand, for example, why, within the context of the transition, the Count-Duke of Olivares, the minister to

King Philip IV, sought to limit the power of the nobles (his own class) and encouraged policies that objectively favored mercantile interests and relations (Rodríguez 359-360). Of course, this struggle between two radically different historical constraints also frames Catalina de Erauso's life story, but what is absolutely crucial here is that the prevailing ideologies of the period are the substrata of social life, and without them the text of *Historia de la monja alférez* would cease to have meaning. Moreover, if one discounts *Historia's* location in these historical matrices, critics could say virtually anything about the text—and with impunity—so long as their elucidation and analyses reflect present day tastes, norms of enquiry, interpretative pressures, and so forth. Thus, in so far as constituting unconscious mechanisms that give form and meaning to Catalina's thoughts and actions, these ideological matrices are there as the font of her social existence, and she is compelled to draw on them to transform her life.

History and Mutability

That said, what some critics, tacitly or intentionally, believe to be Erauso's "private"⁵ transformation cannot be completely divorced from the notion of transformation as an historical possibility. In this regard, only two distinctive possibilities emerge for producing or stifling such a notion. For feudal substantialism, transformation is inadmissible, except as the result of a miracle or magical incantation, such as in the transubstantiation of the Host into the body of Christ or the alchemist's conversion of base metals into gold. For the animism of mercantile relations, by contrast, transformation is not only possible, but also 'natural' given its premise that things do not possess inherent and organic qualities and are hence invariably labile. At its core, animism assumes the disavowal of the Scholastic-Aristotelian notion of 'Nature' in

which beings are such in virtue of inborn static characteristics. Justifiably, if there is no essential nature, then everything is in a state of flux. In lieu of ‘Nature,’ animism will emphasize the notion of ‘Soul’ or ‘Platonic body’ (i.e. as seen in the lyric of Garcilaso de la Vega: ‘mi alma os ha cortado a su medida’).⁶ This notion of ‘soul,’ of the individual considered, in principle as unrestrained by the body, establishes the possibility for Erauso’s metamorphosis.

Though the animist concept of soul, which features as ‘mind’ in Cartesian philosophy, offers only a broad vignette for treating the issue of Catalina’s identity, it will serve to interpret subsidiary questions such as that of gender attitudes, crossdressing and so forth by serving as their neurological core, so to speak. By way of an initial foray into the matter, it is important to note that with the disintegration of feudal relations and the sacralized bonds that inhere therein, new moral imperatives arise. For this reason, if virile qualities, for example, enjoy currency under feudalism, the social value of those qualities cannot be related to the ‘adrenalin-driven’ impulses of a society that is organized around the idea of progress, but rather only to a divinely ordered society in which ‘man’ is conceived “by nature” to be closer to God than his counterpart in the chain of being. Therefore, in the context of substantialism, while virile qualities are not undesirable in a woman, woman only ‘imitates’ or aspires to manliness (i.e. is more God/Christ-like) to the extent that Man, in his fallen nature, is somewhat more removed from sin than his derivative. Catalina de Erauso’s transvestitism cannot take place within the confines of this ‘Scholastic body,’ which suggests that the difference between man and woman is not fortuitous, but something inscribed by God in nature: simply, woman derives from man and man derives from God. This order cannot be overturned, and underpins, for example,

current resistance within the Catholic Church to the ordination of women (i.e., it is not a question of woman's 'rights' –sic- the argument goes, for the calling to vocation is a decision made by the Lord himself). The case of Joan of Arc, by way of contrast, is another matter even though she is indeed operating within the limits of substantialism and the "Scholastic body.' I point out in reference to Joan of Arc that crossdressing is only acceptable because, like any saint, she is conceived as possessor of divine qualities, and one who has been 'chosen' or 'called upon.' According to this logic, Joan ceases to be like all women, who are genealogically related to the originator of sin and daughters of Eve, and is rather transfigured by the divine purpose that resides in her. Ultimately, crossdressing is permissible in this case to the extent that the warrior armor that Joan dons reflects her sacred character. In opposition to the case of the saint, who was (in)formed by prophetic visions, Catalina de Erauso is driven by Machiavellian *virtú*, the use of prowess and determination, in the acquisition of 'merit,' or what may be called 'symbolic capital,' which appears increasingly as the most practicable way to ensure survival for an *hidalgo* in the gradual breakdown of feudalism. For those who aim to qualify for a position in the state bureaucracy, this disposition is especially important. Catalina's mutation is, in part, a function of this drive to acquire merit, which is in turn an effect of the split between public and private spheres that is characteristic of the functioning of the Spanish absolutist state: while the public sphere is reserved for politics, the creation of a private space serves to promote the needs of private enterprise. Likewise, the public/private dichotomy provides a domain for the cultivation of private talent, and so its public recognition.⁷ It stands to reason that if virile⁸ qualities, as conceived by this social formation, are endemic to the scramble for merit, it is plausible

to regard Erauso's crossdressing as an acknowledgement of the value of "manliness" for the emerging bourgeoisie in so far as it assumes a corporal behavior in keeping with the demands of *virtú*. The gambling and recurrent altercations that Catalina is involved in throughout *Historia* are a manifestation of such conduct. In this sense, it is not unusual for this class horizon, as it engenders itself as masculine, to envision the nobility as effeminate,⁹ especially once the bourgeoisie has consolidated its economic dominion.

The Literal Truth of Subject, Market, and Allegory

The initial scene of *Historia de la monja alférez* serendipitously objectifies for us the ideology of the subject previously mentioned. Having deserted the convent in San Sebastian, where she was to take her vows, Catalina undresses, fashions a man's garb, jettisons the nun's habit, and cuts her tresses. She resolves to blaze a path with no apparent direction or motive ("eché no sé por donde," 95). This absence of direction is a recurring theme in the narrative sequence¹⁰ depicting her escape and metamorphosis. In male attire, the fugitive nun can blaze a trail ("calando caminos") from the sacralized space of the convent to the city (Victoria), whose "air makes men free" ("el aire de la ciudad hace libre a quien lo respira") according to a Medieval European adage uttered into various languages. Regardless of the fact that gender is masked in the Spanish version, yet bold in the English, it would be accurate to say that it is *men* who stand to gain the most from life in the towns, a fact which draws attention, in some measure, to why Erauso dons the garments and assumes the mannerisms of the opposite sex, allowing her to vicariously live out the more advantageous 'role.'¹¹ In the sacralized space of the nunnery, the body is a 'substantial form': Catalina's situation mimics the basic feudal relationship, and like a serf, she is there to serve her Lord. Withdrawal from the convent's

space then presupposes a distancing from the sacred that, in turn, serves to figuratively illustrate the impact of bourgeois relations on the sacralized horizon of feudalism. In fact, this impact was to unleash a process of secularization and sever the bonds that tied the serf to manor and lord in order to turn the serf into a subject, or an individual proper, who is capable of selling his labor power as a “free” individual, responsible for his own thoughts and actions, and unbound in serving no master other than bare necessity itself, or so the story goes.

With respect to the initial sequences of *Historia*, in alluding to ‘substantial form,’ I am evoking the core notion of feudal substantialism. The implication in speaking of ‘substance’ is that there is a basic entity that persists through change. Any alteration of this basic entity is perceived as a sign of corruption or, more positively, an indication of divine presence. Identity is otherwise stable. Apparent deviations will eventually tend toward their ‘natural place.’ Therefore, “[n]obles tend to nobility, serfs towards serfdom, and slaves towards servitude,” (Read 64) and, by analogy one might add, woman tends towards womanhood. The convent as an expression of this feudal(izing) logic is also a sign of a whole ideological matrix from which Erauso’s narrative begins to separate itself: a separation that takes the form of an experiential narrative. In other words, in telling a life story, the narrative breaks with the substantialist notion of a Book (examples of which are stories of chivalry and hagiographic narratives that always function mimetically to approximate a foundational Truth) to create a linear narrative of progress, where the end or goal is not determined beforehand. As *narration*, properly speaking (in counterpoint to imitation), its purpose is not to read-off the inscriptions of the Truth in nature, but to render the things of the world as literal realities. The *literal gaze* through

which the world is perceived is the outcome of the secularizing logic of emerging bourgeois relations, and presupposes that the objects of the world no longer serve as vessels for the resounding voice of God's *signatures*, but are mere literal *signs*. The shift from signature to sign, which frames the difference between Catalina as nun, say, and Catalina as transvestite in the narrative's initial passages, suggests that in order for transvestitism to occur, 'woman' cannot be, as already mentioned, a substantial form. I remind the reader, in passing, that the case of Joan of Arc is exclusive and only makes sense from a feudal standpoint; Catalina's transvestitism, by comparison, is never expressed in terms of a 'calling.' If, however, Catalina is only *literal*, then she is only ever defined by chance, and like any sign, she is only arbitrary and conventional. By this virtue, I suggest that Catalina de Erauso does in truth fashion her own life, but ultimately as a ruse of ideology. In this respect, Catalina is our contemporary and precursor. That is, she exploits the lack of an essential link between clothes and the body that they dress in order to create her own subjectivity through them in a way that is similar to how we, for example, also create our own subjectivity today through the products of pop culture. We create a life for ourselves, which we believe to be truly unique and different. This "freedom" to make a life for ourselves (not unlike that of Catalina) is part of our modern ideological unconscious in a way that is radically different from the fact that lavish wardrobe served nobles as a way not of producing their subjectivity as individuals (an idea they could care less about), but of buttressing their objective class power (see note 13 below). The circumstances for this modern sense of self are, in a way, "narrated" in the very lines of *Historia*, as we shall see. At the surface level, one can see that by leaving the convent, which stands as a 'natural place,' Catalina is confronted with the

‘void.’ *Historia* like any ‘narrative’ is an attempt to fill the vacuum produced by the withdrawal of the sacred, which always —one needs to note— assumes plenitude of meaning. This semantic vacuum is really the undergirding for the appearance of signs in opposition to signatures. As a signature, Catalina’s crossdressing is not only a form of deception, but also a transgression of one’s nature, for one’s raiment should be adequate to one’s being in a society founded on the notions of blood, honor and lineage as forms of essential nature.¹² As a mere literal sign, she is no longer in the domain of absolute meaning, but rests in regard to a certain norm, one that is not implacable —it goes without saying— like divine laws, but always contingent. Signs abound in the theater: the actor/actress can *stand in* for the king or the princess, and can perform the part of Hamlet or Lady Macbeth, but only as the result of a tacit agreement among spectators. In society (off-stage), if Catalina stands in for a man, either bourgeois relations will label her abnormal (“una rara”), given the weight of familial ideology, or substantialism, given that she is in violation of her true nature, will move on to explain the irregularity in its own terms. But I will delve more into this later. Now, I am merely concerned to state that her transvestitism can only be subject to judgment from these two competing moralities.¹³

The literal norm, from which *Historia* is written, saturates the text from beginning to end; from the initial sequences, where she flees from her father while serving the King’s secretary don Juan de Idiáquez, to the accounting and record keeping Catalina performs for the affluent merchant from Trujillo, Juan de Urquiza. While the book¹⁴ in which she meticulously registers all commercial transactions for Urquiza conveys the importance attributed to commodity value and surplus earnings, the workings of the mercantile

bourgeoisie could not be more transparent than in the description of her duties while employed under Juan López de Arguijo:

Entregóme [Juan López de Arguijo] diez mil cabezas de carneros de la tierra para con ellos trajinar, con ciento y tantos Indios. Entregóme una gran partida de dinero para que fuese a los llanos de Cochabamba y comprase trigo, y moliéndolo, lo llevase a vender al Potosí, donde había falta y tenía valor. Fui y compré ocho mil fanegas a cuatro pesos; carguélas en los carneros, víneme a los molinos de Guilcomayo. Molí tres mil quinientas, y partí con ellas al Potosí. Vendílas luego allí a panaderas a quince pesos y medio. Volvíme a los molinos; hallé allí molido parte del resto, y hallé compradores para todo. Vendílo todo a diez pesos, y volvíme con el dinero al contado a las Charcas a mi amo, el cual, vista la buena ganancia, me volvió a mandar volver a lo mismo a Cochabamba (132-3).

Mercantile production alone is not described here; the passage also renders literal the contradictory character of Spain's colonial economic development supported by ancillary slave labor as well as the commodification of "free" labor power in the interest of profit maximization. The passage makes clear that both slaves and propertyless laborers are presupposed as conditions for production, as well as for the renewal of those conditions: "me volvió a mandar volver a lo mismo." In this regard, the passage represents, perhaps more than any other, Erauso's real conditions of existence. Her status as noble, by contrast, lacks any real infrastructure and works only symbolically when she needs to position herself in a competitive labor market or to summon her privileges as a *vizcaína* to get out of trouble with the authorities. Not only is the wage-form implied in the cited passage in terms of the need to carry out what are purely economic imperatives, it is *the* form through which Erauso's relationships are expressed. To this effect, she is quite candid and specific about her wages. This is not only the case in the "service" of merchants, for even as soldier she performs her service in exchange for a salary. As critics often fail to point out, Catalina is a *mercenary* soldier. To emphasize on the other

hand that she is a ‘soldier of fortune’ tends to obscure this point. Coincidentally, Machiavelli makes the claim that mercenary soldiers are “useless and dangerous” for modern states, in so far as they are faithful only to a “trifling wage” (43).

I mention the work’s literal problematic along with this final question of ‘fidelity,’ because it brushes firmly against a differential logic operating in the text. The literal details, for example, from the episode where Erauso tries to save María Dávalos from her husband, who suspecting her betrayal hopes to avenge himself, contrast strikingly with the theme of honor, which the episode noticeably brings into view. In her mule-ride to the nearest sanctuary, for example, Erauso declares: “Llegué a una venta... desperté al ventero... cuidé de mi mula... diónos ropa, unos huevos, y pan, y frutas, procuramos torcer y exprimir la ropa” (139). The attention that is given to these particulars—their mere appearance I would argue—presents a language that is of a different order than the overarching dynamic of the scene with its more “transcendent” emphasis on a key value of seigniorial ideology, namely honor. But nowhere is the contrast between the literal gaze that pervades the text and an allegorical one more apparent than in the description of the battle in the plains of Valdivia:

Tomaron y asolaron los indios la dicha Valdivia: salimos a ellos, y batallamos tres o cuatro veces, maltratándolos siempre y destrozándolos; pero llegándoles la vez última socorro, nos fue mal y nos mataron mucha gente y capitanes, y mi alférez, y llevaron la bandera. Viéndola llevar, partimos tras ella yo y dos soldados de a caballo, por medio de gran multitud, atropellando y matando, y recibiendo daño: en breve cayó muerto uno de los tres. Proseguimos los dos. Llegamos a la bandera, cayó de un bote de lanza mi compañero. Yo recibí un mal golpe en una pierna, maté al cacique que la llevaba y quitésela, y apreté con mi caballo, atropellando, matando e hiriendo a infinidad, pero malherido y pasado de tres flechas y de una lanza en el hombro izquierdo, que sentía mucho. ... Al cabo de ellos mi hermano me sacó del gobernador la bandera que yo gané, y quedé alférez de la compañía de Alonso Moreno . . . (114).

The scene is plagued by what may be called ‘epic narrativity.’ In other words, the scene is written with the obvious gesture of *showing*: take for instance the hyperbole of a warrior woman who, having been cut through with a lance and sustained arrow wounds, manages to recapture the ensign amid the pandemonium of battle and with no training in warfare. Obviously, the drive for a reward—a soldier’s endeavors are usually acknowledged in the form of an *encomienda*—gives form to Erauso’s description of the battle. But there is more at stake in this passage that, I insist, runs forcefully against the general literalism of *Historia*. What predominates is not the ‘eye-that-sees-the-thing’ of the literal gaze, as for instance in Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s description of the first battle scenes in the conquest of the New World, but rather an account modeled on books of chivalry. If what is represented in this passage are not Catalina’s deeds, but those of the Hero or heroism in abstract, it is because, in contrast to the literal account of a foot-soldier such as Bernal Díaz, the cited description draws on another available norm for writing the Conquest, namely the allegorical reading practiced by Francisco López de Gómara in whose *Historia de la conquista de México* the apostles St. James the Moorslayer and St. Peter emerge as part of Cortés’ cavalry. The other norm is best represented by Díaz, who writes:

hablando aquí en respuesta de lo que han dicho y escrito, personas que no lo alcanzaron a saber, ni lo vieron, ni tener noticia verdadera de lo que sobre esta materia propusieron, salvo hablar a sabor de su paladar, por oscurecer si pudiesen nuestros muchos y notables servicios, porque no haya fama de ellos ni sean tenidos en tanta estima como son dignos de tener; y aun como la malicia humana es de tal calidad, no querrían los malos detractores que fuésemos antepuestos y recompensados como su Majestad lo ha mandado a sus virreyes, presidentes y gobernadores (1).¹⁵

That foot-soldiers were not awarded their rightful compensation was already a theme in Díaz's time for which reason it would only make sense that he offer an alternative version of what happened. Despite the literal fiber of her own narrative, and considering the significance of feudalizing values in post-tridentine Spain, for Erauso it is still viable to exploit the opposite ideological perspective and allegorize in order to establish her merit and make a legitimate petition to the Crown for a reward.

The Uses of Narration

*...when the identity of roses with virginity
is more than just poetic Sunday dress...¹⁶*

Pursued by the authorities for one of several homicides, Catalina is saved from arrest by the Bishop of Guamanga's intervention, and is, possibly out of gratitude, inclined to be forthright with him, and reveal her status. Upon listening to an initial interview in which Catalina discloses that she is a woman and explains how she lived her life, the Bishop demands a proper confession. This confessional *scene* represents an abrupt turnaround with respect to the general succession of events from which her story unfolds, for it represents a way of showing that stands in sharp contrast to the literal. If the 'eye-that-sees-the-thing' is part and parcel of a narrative of progress, then confession, as distinct from testimony, evokes a logic of redemption; and redemption, in this scene, is the recognition of one's face in the mirror of the Other's discourse (as sinner, etc.). That is, it inscribes Catalina's story (if not Catalina herself) within the 'rules' of confession, which dissolve Catalina's account of her life as 'individual experience.' To be exact, Catalina's literal story can have no legitimacy by itself, and must first be hermeneutically aligned with Truth. That Truth must come before "facts" or "experience," according to

the sacralized vision of substantialism, is clear from the Church's desire to verify Catalina's virginity *before* endorsing the content of her confession. What increasingly becomes evident in the sequences that span from her confession to the Bishop of Guamanga until her meeting with Pope Urban VIII are the limits imposed on her individuality. The limits, however, are not only those that may be bracketed under mercantile imperatives, but also those more 'symbolic' or 'superstructural' limits established by substantialism, which not only proscribes crossdressing, but the subject as well. For if Francisco de Quevedo, who writes from this perspective in *El buscón*, is impelled to drag his character, Pablos, through the mud, so to speak, in order to mortify and debase him, then the Church apparatus too must execute its designs on Catalina. For this perspective, she is execrable, not because she is a woman, who has transgressed the public/private divide, or her "domestic" limits—for these domains do not exist for substantialist ideology (everything is "public," to use a word, for this horizon)—but because as subject, she is eroding constituted authority. Individualism is not only breeding in Europe, but more so in America, where it is having its concrete manifestation in 'rogue' conquistadors such as Lope de Aguirre and Hernán Cortés in the wake of the new, more lenient, conditions they encounter in the New World, where the weight of the official substantialist ideology holds less sway than in Europe. What is revealed, in her encounter with the Bishop of Guamanga, is not the literal story of her life as told up until this point, but rather the interpretation of that literal story in substantialist terms—it is a refunctioning of this story, I emphasize, in terms of her honor. For to have abandoned her 'natural place' as a woman and, in so doing, maintained the purity of her blood—the honor of her lineage—is indeed a 'miracle,' for the substantialist outlook. This rationale

forms part of a substantialist attempt to explain and justify for itself this contradictory image. In the end, what this scene makes present, as we shall see, is the power of substantialist ideology to transfigure the image of Catalina into an ‘orthodox anomaly,’ even as the ideology of the subject becomes ubiquitous.

Upon making what the Bishop would consider a proper confession, Catalina de Erauso undergoes a concurring physical examination wherein two matrons verify her “integrity.” Chastity is a key element in their assessment of this unusual case, because for substantialism, Catalina must tend towards her natural and purposive end; any incongruity can be understood as a sign of “corruption”; the faintest suspicion that she is impure can jeopardize her “merits” and the sincerity of her claims. The authentication of her “virginity,” then, by anxious Church authorities constitutes their trump card, as it were, in manufacturing an image of Catalina that sits comfortably with substantialism: one that *shows that it is God’s providence that directs her*. Consecrated, then, by the highest authorities, the Church and the Monarchy, she is different only inasmuch as this difference exists in consonance with power. Evident from the weight that is given to her chastity, she becomes an accepted anomaly, very much in the same way that the life of a martyr or a saint represents an aberration with respect to standard religious devotion, just as it defines devotion itself. In this sense, the story has something of a hagiographic narrative, conferring on her a kind of aura. One must recall, in this respect, the Bishop of Guamanga’s words to Catalina, which resonate with telling detail: “...os venero como una de las personas notables de este mundo...” (161, my emphasis). Considering that Catalina’s story renders the Bishop speechless, offering by way of communication only the sublime tears of one who has witnessed the presence of the divine —“se quedó

también sin hablar, y llorando a lágrima viva” (161)—, the term *venerar* alludes to the formation of a hallowed status for the transvestite. But what purpose does a “saint” serve¹⁷ if not to be a concrete example of the imitation of Christ. Catalina de Erauso’s life is exemplary to the extent that she is the successful incarnation of an ideal, and, like any saint or martyr, instructs as to the normative behavior, which is one of sacrifice: a negation of individuality in favor of the common good. In this sense, the image of a transvestite warrior is like grist for the substantialist mill. Given Spain’s contradictory assimilation into capitalism, drawing in its tow the seigniorial ideology that ran the absolutist state, the strangeness of Catalina could not be left to stand on its own. Constituted authority had to wrest control of an image that actually belonged to the opposite ideological tendency. In this way, the memoirs do not only promote Erauso’s celebrity for the purpose of securing a state pension, but they also aid Church and State in harnessing the figure of Catalina in the service of Empire, as the icon of a good soldier and citizen. For this reason, upon arriving in Rome, her name is inscribed in a book indicating her status as “Roman citizen,” giving voice to Spain’s “civilizing” mission.

The disproportion between the narrative of growth that one encounters in *Historia* and the rearticulation of this narrative (within the narrative), occurring from the confessional scene onward, paves the way for the questioning of a deeper contradiction, which the narrative itself obscures, namely that between the ideological formation of the subject and her real conditions of existence, for how can Catalina defend/speak her own “life,” if that life only exists to serve a social requirement? Even when Catalina attempts to guard the legitimacy of this life in the final chapter in what would, upon a perfunctory reading of this chapter, appear to be a minor quarrel with two prostitutes who turn Catalina into

an object of derision, is it not history that speaks yet here too? Though it is reasonable to argue that more tangible institutions like Church and Monarchy, and even more abstract but no less real institutions such as the patriarchy, act as constraints on individual behavior, it is also no less true that Catalina is ‘inoculated’ with the meaning of life in the 17th century. *Dónde es el camino?* the ladies ask. They summon her with this somewhat ambiguous, yet inflammatory, question preceded by their laughter. Why does the question aggravate Catalina? Is it charged with sarcasm and ridicule about her appearance, or rather with envy and resentment at her success? One must admit that unlike the Italian ladies, Catalina has in a certain sense escaped her ‘destiny,’ a theme that could not be more evident than in the celebratory rites held in her honor in the Holy City:

Hízose el caso allí notorio, y fue notable el concurso de que me vide cercado, de personajes, príncipes, obispos, cardenales, y *el lugar que me hallé abierto donde quería*, de suerte que en mes y medio que estuve en Roma, fue raro el día en que no fuese convidado y regalado de príncipes; y especialmente un viernes fui convidado y regalado por unos caballeros, por orden particular y encargo del senado romano, y me asentaron en un libro por ciudadano romano . . . Y todos, o los más, me mostraron notable agrado y caricia, y me hablaron muchos (173-4, my emphasis).

Obviously, Catalina has managed to carve out a *space* amid the “disorder” of the transition: *el lugar que me hallé abierto donde quería*, she says. But, more importantly, has not *doña* Catalina, a noble subsumed by capital, knowingly gained her ‘substantialist’ revenge by performing her role correctly amid the “chaos” of history? Is she not awarded tributary income and privileges without having to labor, like a proper noble? How else could these wretched ladies react? Indeed, they are a stark reminder of those who have no space or time, and are unable to reflect the “redemptive” image that their society prescribes for them, living their lives through resentment. In all fairness, Catalina does

not have it only her way, as the episode of her confession attests. Church authorities cannot take Catalina, or anyone else for that matter, as a mere literal sign (viz. a woman *standing in* for a man). In good form, they must save the signs in this world by reinterpreting them as signatures in which God's intentionality is expressed. As substantialism considers crossdressing a sin, and only permissible under special circumstances, the "oddity" of Erauso has to be translated as a miraculous phenomenon, an intervention of the divine in the world to perpetuate a Holy order. In this sense, her actions in the conquests of Chile and Peru make her a suitable icon for substantialism with respect to the fate of the Spanish empire, for this reconfiguration of Erauso supports its ideology as the one that is to prevail throughout the course of imperial expansion. This explains why Pedro del Valle, who I mention at the outset, like others entrenched in feudalizing ideology, were impervious to her transvestitism, which can easily be accommodated to the status quo even as it is embroiled in the contradictory, though resolute, development of an emergent capitalist Empire.¹⁸

In order to fully validate Catalina's transvestitism, the Church must make it a public spectacle, one that aims to shape collective consciousness and give rise to consent: "Parece que el caso se divulgó, y era inmenso el concurso que allí acudió, sin poder excusarse allí la entrada a personajes, por más que yo lo sentía y su ilustrísima también" (161). Perhaps both the Bishop and Catalina are complicit in building this public image from which they are inclined to benefit, albeit in different ways, as Erauso's conviction in this last line contrasts strikingly with the air of felicity with which she describes the attention that she drew in Rome. She is turned into a public figure, like an actor or prostitute, in hopes that popularity will make her less of a threat. Private transformations

beyond the control of substantialist ideology can have a devastating effect. After all, the repetition of this “miracle” by others, who may want to follow in her path, can invalidate its sacred character and have the inverse effect of making transformation artificial (i.e. the object of the will). Too much public exposure and circulation, in contrast, can put her honor at risk for which reason the Church anxiously encourages Catalina to return to her “rightful” place in the convent. It seems clear that Catalina expects that this process of consecration will eventually lead to material reward, which is why she initially concedes to her confinement. Fortunately for Catalina, there is an unpredicted turn of events: word comes from Spain affirming that she was never a professed nun to begin with, and is free to go. In spite of Bishop Julián de Cortázar’s insistence that Catalina remain in the convent of her particular religious order, she determines not to abide by conventional piety: “le dije que no tenía orden ni religión, y que trataba de volverme a mi patria, donde haría lo que pareciese más conveniente para mi salvación” (165). The term “salvación” here is emptied of any sacred connotation, for lacking religious affiliation, Erauso’s deliverance can only be understood as worldly and animal survival (Goetz 99). In this sense, I conclude that if she finally seems to resist confinement, substantialism has already made its view of her public, by which it refuses to go along with the artificiality of signs. Nonetheless, it is not for this reason that Catalina is merely an artificial or spurious construction, nor is she an expression of the Book of the World. Rather, as her autobiographical account will attest—in its irreconcilable creases and folds—Catalina is primarily an outcome of the invisible social forces that shape her ‘life’ in a moment of acute ideological strife, or what one may deem precarious times for life, even when life is here nothing more than an idiom of history.

Undoubtedly, Catalina's transvestitism serves to challenge the feudalizing ideology of her moment. But while crossdressing (alteration) is a power or potential of an ideology such as animism whose exercise allows Catalina to by-pass the strictures governing women's lives in her time (conventional existence, marriage, normative behavior, etc.), it is not the expression of a freedom, but rather the symptom of an enslavement. Indeed, with the bourgeoisie as history's protagonist, Catalina's crossdressing externalizes the objective conditions established by this social class, most importantly its ideology of freedom and possessive individualism. Catalina does not crossdress because she identifies with the bourgeoisie and its struggle against the obstacles of feudal society. She only "identifies" with its unconscious pre-suppositions, which ensure the meaning of her crossdressing, for becoming a possessive individual only makes sense as a man. That Catalina lived against the notion of a sacralized life with a preordained meaning through masculine guise and demeanor stands not only because women are rather an article to be possessed, but because the question of 'to be or not to be' was always located in another terrain for her, namely in a bourgeois context in which the question of 'being' as free creativity is always limited by the question of 'to have or have not.' That is, only men could 'have' insofar as capable of accessing the public sphere where, if fortune has it, they can obtain a livelihood. Thus, if Catalina's crossdressing stood to jeopardize substantialism, it is only by exercising a secular masculinity (namely Machiavellian *virtú*) in counterpoint to it. However, since under mercantilism one only 'is' to the extent of 'having' or 'possessing,' pursuit of a material reward became central to Erauso's narrative. Nobles can always put their faith in their lineage, but the creative individual must always prove herself, must always possess something. But ideology while

possessing is also a thing possessed, and that is why one must always ask whose language is spoken when one speaks, thinks or writes. In this sense, I have tried to make no pre-suppositions about Catalina de Erauso, about her impulses, desires or individual intentions, but only about ideology in so far as it serves as a language for the body. Certainly, what is important to identify about the figure of Erauso is not that she is a ‘transformative subject’ (indeed, in a certain sense she is) or, to the contrary, that she serves merely as a support for ideology, but rather that her transvestitism is the glyph in which one can begin to read the debacle of a whole social structure, and therein lies the real value of *Historia de la monja alférez*.

NOTES

¹ Cited in Jesús Munárriz’s “Epílogo,” to *Historia de la monja alférez: escrita por ella misma* (Madrid: Hiperión, 2000) 108.

² All references are to the following edition of the text, unless otherwise stated: *Historia de la monja alférez, Catalina de Erauso, escrita por ella misma*, ed. Ángel Esteban (Madrid: Cátedra, 2002).

³ Cf., for example, Sherry Velasco who in her *The Lieutenant Nun: Transgenderism, Lesbian Desire and, Catalina de Erauso* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2000) points out that Erauso’s “transgression” (as she calls it) has its roots in orthodoxy, for even in Fray Luis de León one finds the notion of a “manly woman” as a value (2).

⁴ In addition to my own summary treatment of these terms as ideological matrices, one can consult, for a more in-depth and exhaustive description, Juan Carlos Rodríguez, *Teoría e historia de la producción ideológica*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Akal, 1990) as well as the subsequent texts of this still evolving research program. Rodríguez’s first and principal work is also available in English translation: *Theory and History of Ideological Production* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002).

⁵ Cf., for example, the work of M. E. Perry, and that of S. Velasco.

⁶ The idea is that it is no longer the Divine that gives form to things in Garcilaso’s animist lyric, but the *individual* soul: “a su medida.”

⁷ For a thorough discussion of this question, see Rodríguez, specifically the chapter section entitled “La relación Privado-Público: el mérito, la edición y las academias,” *Teoría e historia*.

⁸ *Nota bene*: both terms ‘virtú’ and ‘virile’ derive from *vir* (Lat. *man*).

⁹ Spanish literature offers a host of examples, but suffice it to mention the characterization of the nobility in the *Lazarillo de Tormes*, especially the “Prólogo” and, of course, the “Tratado tercero.”

¹⁰ For instance: “me salí a la calle sin haberla visto ni saber por dónde echar ni adónde ir”; “Tiré no sé por dónde”; and later “eché no sé por donde” (95).

¹¹ Of course, since wardrobe is a convention, and much of what we call behavior is ideological, one ought not to hold unambiguously that Catalina transforms into a Man, but rather into what her historical conjuncture deems to be manly. I am saying that Catalina does not adopt the characteristics of Man as an abstract —but false— universal, but rather man in his existing spatio-temporal coordinates, and in so doing reproduces some of the more objectionable aspects of modernity’s Man —objectionable that is from a moral axiology that is opposed not only to historically specific codification of masculinity but the modern individual itself.

¹² Obviously, Catalina does not deviate from this formulation, for while her crossdressing is a violation of substantialist norms, her obsession with clothing, their quality and so forth, rampant throughout *Historia*, is indeed substantialist and indicative of lingering nobiliary values. Carlos Astarita’s assertions regarding the social function of dress as a way for the nobility as a class to reproduce itself are insightful in this respect:

...dress had the basic social function of making one’s social rank and evincing one’s power. Beyond their ordinary usefulness, then, these fabrics constituted a language, acquiring a semiotic value as prestige goods with a role in social relations and especially in the symbolism through which the lords demonstrated their power (110).

¹³ Moreover, it is useful to point out again that the way that the body signifies in *Historia de la monja alférez* is through the animist thematic of the spiritualized body, exemplified in, among other ideological phenomena, Shakespeare’s comedies, where (sexual) transvestitism is commonplace —here the actors can wear the mask or costume of the opposite sex, because ultimately they are not determined by their nature, but by ‘love’ for the soul of the world. This figure of a ‘beautiful soul,’ which in animism is considered relatively separate from the world, but capable of joining the *anima mundi* through the universal force of attraction, is a theme that one encounter in not only in

Shakespeare, but in the poetic universe that extends from Petrarch through Garcilaso and Herrera to John Donne.

¹⁴ It is curious to note that this rather “mundane” book, baring notations, which point directly to commercial exchange practices, is obtained by turning the feudal Book on its head: if the feudal Book reveals the Truth of the Other world, the book (lowercase) merely becomes a facsimile of this one to the extent the it describes *only* what is available to sensuous perception.

¹⁵ For a recent contribution to the study of this significant text, see María del Mar Campos Fernández-Figares, *El caballo y el jaguar: Sobre la Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Granada: Comares, 2002).

¹⁶ These lines, derived from a key work by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, sum up the substantialist idea of an essential bond between outward appearance and inner nature (239).

¹⁷ To claim that the Church and Crown use Catalina is not to imply that she does not herself use these institutions of power in turn. It is, I think, evident that only through these institutional mechanisms can she effectively realize her merit, for only they have license to confer the sought-after reward.

¹⁸ As G. Arrighi maintains, the growth of historical capitalism with all its contradictions was relentless, despite the political attempts by Spain, the Hapsburg Imperial House and the papacy to save whatever vestiges they could of the medieval system of rule (40-44).

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