

REIMAGINING EARLY MODERN GENDER AND SEXUAL TRANSGRESSION: CROSS-DRESSING IN THOMAS DE QUINCEY AND RICARDO PALMA

RECONFIGURACIONES DE LA TRANSGRESIÓN DE GÉNERO Y SEXUAL EN LA MODERNIDAD TEMPRANA: EL TRAVESTISMO EN THOMAS DE QUINCEY Y RICARDO PALMA

Primavera Cuder
Universidad de Jaén, España
pcuder@ujaen.es
<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6834-1920>

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ABSTRACT

Born in San Sebastián in 1592, Catalina/Antonio de Erauso —the 'Lieutenant Nun'— began forging their identity after escaping a convent disguised as a man, and enrolling in the military to sail for the colonies of the New World. Despite Erauso's popularity in the 17th century, their story lapsed into obscurity until it saw a resurgence in works such as Thomas De Quincey's *The Spanish Military Nun* (1847) and Ricardo Palma's "¡A iglesia me llamo!" (1872). Viewed through the lens of postcolonial and queer historiography, De Quincey's work is indicative of a wider European proclivity to position the Americas within an exotic framework in ways that implicitly legitimise imperial expansion. Palma's take, on the other hand, emphasises the creole nation-building efforts by claiming cultural autonomy while upholding the old European ethnic hierarchies. It is in such reworkings that Erauso's gender nonconformity becomes the very ground on which both Creole nationalist rhetoric and imperial fantasy are made manifest.

Keywords: Cross-dressing, Gender/Sexual Transgression, Postcolonial Critique, Catalina/Antonio de Erauso, Thomas de Quincey, Ricardo Palma.

RESUMEN

Nacide en San Sebastián en 1592, Catalina/Antonio de Erauso —la 'Monja Alférez'— empezó a forjar su identidad tras huir de su convento disfrazades de hombre y alistarse en el ejército para zarpar hacia las colonias del Nuevo Mundo. Ampliamente conocida en el siglo XVII, la historia de Erauso cayó en el olvido hasta ser recuperada gracias a reelaboraciones

literarias como *The Spanish Military Nun* (1847) de Thomas De Quincey y "¡A iglesia me llamo!" (1872) de Ricardo Palma.

Mediante perspectivas poscoloniales y la historiografía queer, se evidencia que el relato de De Quincey sitúa las Américas en un marco exótico que legitima implícitamente la expansión imperial. Por el contrario, la versión palmina se inscribe en el proyecto criollo post-independentista reclamando autonomía cultural, pero reproduciendo jerarquías étnicas de raíz europea. En estas reconfiguraciones, del rechazo de Erauso al conformismo de género deviene un espacio polisémico donde se articulan tanto la fantasía imperial como el discurso nacionalista criollo.

Palabras clave: Travestismo, Transgresión Sexual/de Género, Crítica Postcolonial, Catalina/Antonio de Erauso, Thomas de Quincey, Ricardo Palma.

1. Introduction

A constant source of reinvention, the figure of Catalina/Antonio de Erauso —also known as Alonso Díaz or the 'Lieutenant Nun'— was fictionalised according to sociohistorical contexts both in the 17th century and after. Assigned female at birth in 1592 in San Sebastián, Erauso made a name for themselves as a soldier in the Spanish colonies, only to be forgotten for close to two hundred years. It was not until the 19th century that the figure of Erauso was popularised once again by works such as Thomas De Quincey's *The Spanish Military Nun* (1847) and Ricardo Palma's *tradición* "¡A iglesia me llamo!" (1872) which reimagined and romanticised the early modern narrative. During this period, as noted by Mary Louise Pratt, European colonials still associated the Americas with tropes of alleged underdevelopment and exoticism in order to validate expansion, and while the young Republics of Latin America did fight for independence and modernity, creole societies still reinforced European values, largely maintaining colonial hierarchies and gender dynamics by empowering (white) creole men of the upper classes (172). It was in this context that Erauso's story was reimagined and rewritten, becoming the site of conflicting narratives where Creole nationalism encountered imperial fantasy, and rejection of the Other clashed with an attraction to nonconformity.

2. Gender, Sexuality and Cross-dressing in Europe and the Americas

Throughout history, the description of gender as a marker for identity was ever-changing across times and cultures. Gender ideals underwent significant transformations throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. In the 17th century, gender was conceived in a more flexible manner, heavily influenced by individual merit and actions rather than biological determinism (Aresti 401-02). In his book titled *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990) Thomas Laqueur

argued that, until the 17th century, "[t]o be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the 17th century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category" (8). Building upon Laqueur's argument, Nerea Aresti observes that in Erauso's lifetime "exceptions to prevailing gender norms met with more tolerance in privileged social circles. In other words, Catalina was an exceptional, but not an inconceivable, personage. King Philip IV and Pope Urban VIII set the seal on her strategy of social climbing by granting her a privilege that it was within their power to grant: being a man" (402).

During the Enlightenment, this flexibility around the concept of gender gave way to ideals of equality, promoted by early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges. Sexual difference, however, became simultaneously entrenched as an essentially 'natural' category (Laqueur 8; Aresti 408-09). European thought was deeply influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1762 work, *Émile, or On Education*, which established an inflexible and 'natural' division in society: the alleged strengths of men—might and reason—were now considered the weaknesses of the 'passive and frail' woman and vice versa (352). The moral purity of the 'virtuous' mother became the epitome of womanly perfection, creating an image designed to deter any incursion of women into the domain of men, considered an attempt at flouting their very nature (293). Ultimately, 19th-century Europe interiorised and solidified these precepts as the domesticity of women and the image of the so-called 'angel of the household' became the ultimate tool to keep the patriarchy in place.

Similarly, 18th-century Latin American discourse frequently aligned women with weakness, particularly regarding the perceived connection between inadequate maternal guidance and the 'effeminization' of sons—imagined as the future custodians of the nation.¹ This ideological framework is explicitly articulated in a 1791 epistle attributed to Fray Tomás Méndez Lachica and anonymously published in *El Mercurio Peruano*—a periodical catering to Lima's Creole elite—entitled "Carta remitida á la Sociedad haciendo algunas reflexiones sobre la que se contiene en el Mercurio num. 94 en que se pinta á los Maricones" (Alegre Henderson 101-02). In the letter, the author claims that:

Un niño abandonado en manos de una nutriz, ó sea de su propia madre (la única que cuida de su primera educacion), aprende por imitación quanto en ella mira, no tiene otras lecciones mas que las modales del sexo: y como en esta encuentra todos los halagos de un amor mal entendido, la recíproca ternura hace que á su tiernecita alma se trasladen unas costumbres nada conformes á su condicion. Por otra parte, viciada su naturaleza entre el regalo y la contemplación, criase de un temperamento débil. ... Él se cree de esa manera necesitado á una vida delicada, y se inclina por sus primeras impresiones á todo la femenil: ... debería á lo ménos moderar los vicios que causa en la educacion el excesivo amor materno; y entonces se verían costumbres ménos afeminadas, habría ménos *Maricones*. (121-22; italics in the original)

By the 19th century, while contexts such as Britain saw the consolidation of increasingly rigid gender models, confining the woman—the angel in the house—to the domestic sphere, in Spain and Latin America, the evolution was more gradual (Aresti 410-13). As Palma noted in his *tradición* "La conspiración de la saya y manto": "Nuestras abuelas, que eran más risueñas que las cosquillas, supieron hacer de la vida un carnaval constante" (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*). By the late 18th century, however, the idealised construct of the 'republican mother' had emerged in Latin American discourse as a gendered archetype of patriotic virtue, combining familial devotion with civic responsibility. This figure embodied the transnational circulation of European Enlightenment and Victorian values, such as Rousseauian ideals of domestic femininity, which were adapted to serve nascent nationalist projects in the postcolonial context.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, aside from general statements addressing the gender and sexual nonconformity of individuals assigned male at birth such as those in "Carta remitida á la Sociedad," documented concrete cases remain relatively scarce. In Latin America, notable examples include cross-dressed individuals such as the renowned Afro-Peruvian cook Juan José Cabezudo (ca. 1780-?) and the fictional protagonist of Manuel Atanasio Fuentes's 1878 short story *Lorenzita*—a character medically pathologised as an "indecisión de la naturaleza." The British context yields comparable cross-dressed figures such as: John—Seraphina—Cooper; the theatrical performer Francis Leon (1844-1883); Ernest—Stella—Boulton (1847-1904) and Fredrick—Fanny—Park (1846-1881), defendants in the landmark Boulton and Park sodomy trial; and the celebrated female impersonator Julian Eltinge (1881-1941) (Mayoral Martín 25, 78, 138, 143).

In contrast to the ambiguous and relatively infrequent portrayals of gender nonconforming individuals assigned male at birth, representations of those assigned female at birth appear more frequently in European and American historical records. Several notable figures, immortalised in both historical and mythological accounts, include the 'Cross-Dressed Saints' of medieval sacred art,² the renowned French heroine Joan of Arc (1412-1431), and—alongside Catalina/Antonio de Erauso—Spanish soldiers like Elena/Eleno de Céspedes (1545-?), an Afro-Spanish surgeon and soldier who was prosecuted by the Inquisition on account of alleged hermaphroditism.³ In colonial chronicles, there are notable accounts of 'masculine' women—particularly Indigenous figures—such as La Malinche, a Mexican translator—Mayan and Náhuatl to Spanish—depicted by Bernal Díaz del Castillo; Queen Anacaona, as described by Friar Bartolomé de las Casas; and the Amazon warriors, referenced by Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Christopher Columbus among others (Perales 250-51; Gillespie 157; Silva Santos 36).

During the 18th and 19th centuries, accounts of individuals assigned female at birth who assumed male attire in military contexts were remarkably numerous. Notable among them was Antonio Ita or Yta, baptised in Spain as María Leocadia Álvarez (c. 1770/1771-?), as well as prominent figures in the Latin American independence movements, such as Manuela Sáenz (1797-1856) and Francisca Zubiaga (1803-1835), who wore military uniform and actively participated in combat. This phenomenon is not limited to the Spanish-speaking world. According to Jen Manion, in *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, "A countless number of British and American people assigned female at birth presented themselves as men and went to war or work as soldiers and sailors" (68-69). Notable examples include William Chandler—Mary Lacy—, Robert Shurtliff—Deborah Sampson—, and Hannah Snell, also known as James Gray (1723-1792), whose life is narrated in their memoirs titled *The Female Sailor* (1750).⁴

18th- and 19th-century British literature offers several notable representations of cross-dressed women: Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), based on the life of infamous outlaw Mary Frith (Moll Cutpurse, c. 1584-1659); Matthew Lewis's Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796), featuring Matilda, a woman who disguises herself as the novice Rosario to infiltrate a monastery and pursue the monk Ambrosio; and De Quincey's biographical essay "Joan of Arc" (1847).⁵ All these narratives attest the enduring presence of gender-nonconforming women across different historical, geographical and cultural contexts, underscoring their roles as both historical actors and symbolic figures in the collective imagination.

3. Catalina/Antonio de Erauso in De Quincey and Palma

A central figure of British Romanticism, Thomas Penson De Quincey (1785-1859) was an essayist and critic best known for his autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). De Quincey's life-long opium addiction famously shaped both his experience and his writings, characterised by an intricate, rhythmically elaborate prose style and exploration of dreams, addiction, and the sublimity of everyday experience—a body of work for which he is widely credited with inaugurating the modern tradition of Western 'addiction literature.' Son of an affluent merchant, De Quincey's essayistic and autobiographical works also portray individuals from all social strata, including marginal or liminal figures including addicts, the urban poor, and wanderers. His major works include the autobiographical *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), *The English Mail-Coach* (1849), which combines personal experiences with social commentary, and *The Spanish Military Nun* (1847), where he retells Erauso's adventures. Other more formal works include a piece on literary criticism, "On the

Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth" (1823), and the satirical essay titled "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (1827).

On the other side of the Atlantic, Manuel Ricardo Palma Soriano (1833-1919) was a Peruvian author renowned for his satirical and romantic style, and—like De Quincey—for his prolific literary production. In his prodigious collection of 453 *tradiciones*—or short stories—titled *Tradiciones peruanas*, Palma combines archival research, oral history and historical fiction to portray colonial and 19th-century Peru, focusing especially on its capital, Lima. In an effort to portray the heart of Peruvian social identity, his prose was populated by characters representing every level of its social strata, including those that, like Erauso, inhabited the fringes of society. Palma was more than a man of letters; as director of Peru's National Library, he strived to legitimise his culture and the use of Americanisms in a context where Peninsular Spanish was still considered the gold standard.⁶ Since Palma identified as a *pardo*—both 'mulatto' and 'mestizo'—, in his writings we can perceive his desire to maintain his place in the (white) creole upper while simultaneously promoting the modern values of inclusion taking hold in the new Republics of Latin America.

Among the earliest surviving textual representations of Erauso's life is Juan Pérez de Montalbán's theatrical work *La Monja Alférez* (c. 1626), which helped establish the foundational narrative paradigm for subsequent retellings (García Sánchez 1). The lieutenant's story also exists in a handwritten manuscript deposited at the Royal Academy of History in Madrid on May 24, 1784, by Juan Bautista Muñoz, titled *Vida i sucesos de la Monja Alférez* (Vallbona 15).⁷ Working from this manuscript, Joaquín María Ferrer published the first printed edition of Erauso's story in 1829 under the title *Historia de la monja alférez, Catalina de Erauso, escrita por ella misma* (Vallbona 3). Ferrer presented the work as the authentic memoirs of Erauso herself, though modern scholarship continues to debate the text's authorship and editorial interventions (Vallbona 3).

In 1847, Thomas De Quincey published the novel titled *The Nautico-Military Nun of Spain*—later renamed *The Spanish Military Nun* (we will use the 1909 edition)—, a romanticised reworking of the 1847 French adaptation of *Historia* by Alexis de Valon (Rodríguez Mansilla 814; Velasco 200). Ricardo Palma's *tradición* "¡A iglesia me llamo!", initially published in 1872, also draws upon *Historia*, focusing on Erauso's most cunning stratagems while largely omitting references to his romantic entanglements with women. Other notable 19th-century works concerning the lieutenant nun include Eduardo Blasco's novel titled *Del claustro al campamento o la Monja Alférez*, which makes no reference to Erauso's sexuality, and Juan Mateos' play *La Monja Alférez*, who devises, however, a predominantly original storyline, portraying the protagonist—renamed Andrea—as an aggressive, diabolical, and defiant individual (Velasco 103-04).

According to Aresti, the "textual resurrection" of Erauso's story in the 19th-century

happened at precisely the time when normative conceptions of gender were becoming central to the construction of male and female identity in certain western countries. The ideological changes associated with the rise of liberal politics and the industrial revolution carried to extremes the Enlightenment project of gendering individuals, social relationships and even nature itself. This gendering of physical and social reality came later, or rather happened differently, in traditionally Catholic countries owing to the different paths they had taken through history. This difference is reflected in the very divergent ways in which nineteenth-century British and Spanish authors reinvented Erauso's story (402)

In their respective characterizations of Erauso, De Quincey employs impassioned prose and a novelistic structure, whereas Palma utilises the *tradición*—a generic hybrid of historical record, fiction, and humour. Both De Quincey and Palma romanticise the figure of Catalina/Antonio; however, the British author makes Erauso 'a woman in man's clothing' and a 'victim of fate,' whose masculine identity was dictated by circumstance, not will. This narrative echoes the inflexible moral constraint of Victorian Britain, where gender nonconformity could only be explained and justified as a response to external forces.

Palma's *tradición* offers a different perspective on Erauso's cross-dressing; where De Quincey sees necessity, Palma sees courage and independence. He recasts the fugitive nun as 'a man who was once a woman' and his transformation is perceived as the conscious adoption of the 'superior' virtues of men. In this light, Palma's Antonio seems to display an internalised bond with masculinity rather than a mere disguise, aligning more closely with what we now recognise as a 'trans identity.'⁸ Such an essentialised view fits the ideological needs of Peru in the wake of its independence, when Creole nationalists strived to establish firm masculine virtues as the bedrock of the new nation. It may be argued, therefore, that Erauso's very presence in 19th-century narratives both upholds and undermines the social norms of the day.

Crossing borders, crossing the Atlantic, and cross-dressing, Catalina/Antonio de Erauso could be considered a 17th-century representative of what Yuri Lotman theorised as the 'permeable boundary' of cultural semiosis. As a transgressive figure occupying liminal spaces, Erauso embodies the very periphery of Lotman's semiosphere: that unstable threshold where the organised 'centre'—characterised as 'ours,' 'safe,' and 'harmonious'—confronts its chaotic 'outside'—marked as 'theirs,' 'hostile,' and 'dangerous' (Lotman 131). This binary structure, as Lotman argues, generates the semiotic tension that makes boundary figures like Erauso simultaneously threatening and culturally productive. As Lotman theorises, the periphery—where oppositional, residual, and transgressive phenomena are relegated—constitutes the most generative site of cultural innovation precisely because of its ideological permeability and receptivity to alterity (137). Read through this lens, the

liminal spaces occupied by cross-dressing figures like Erauso function not merely as sites of gender anxiety, but as transformative zones where dominant discourses of gender and sexuality are destabilised and reconfigured.

A postcolonial reading of *The Spanish Military Nun* and "¡A iglesia me llamo!" reveals a sharp divergence in the construction of Erauso: while De Quincey's Catalina remains an exoticised, feminised 'Other'—defined by the seductive mystery of the American landscape—Palma's Antonio is strategically recast as a—white—representative of the Colony, embodying the virtues required by the nascent Peruvian Republic: masculinity, strength, and cunning. Palma draws inspiration from episodes extracted from *Historia*, specifically chapters XI, XII, XV, XX, and XXI (Rodríguez Mansilla 807; Vallbona 2-3; Esteban 26). The first depiction of Erauso takes place during a stormy night in Guamanga—or Huamanga; present-day Ayacucho, Peru—, where Don Antonio Erauso intrudes upon a gambling session of twelve Spanish miners. When fortune favors a miner over the young lieutenant, however, Erauso refuses to accept his defeat starting an altercation during which he ultimately kills one of the players. According to the author, "a pesar de lo imberbe de su rostro," the lieutenant was a man who "había sabido imponer respeto" (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*). Erauso's propensity for violence and disloyalty resulted in multiple desertions—most notably abandoning a Chilean garrison—and subsequent expulsions from posts across Spain's colonial territories, including Tucumán, Potosí, and Cuzco. According to the narrative, the belligerent Don Antonio was "Oriundo de San Sebastián de Guipúzcoa, tenía el genio duro como el hierro de las montañas vascongadas y tan endiablados los puños como el alma. Fama es que los diestros matones y espadachines de su tiempo no alcanzaban a parar una estocada que él había inventado y a la que llamaba, aludiendo a su siniestro éxito, el golpe sin misericordia" (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*).

While Palma reworks and adapts fragments of the *Historia*, focusing on Erauso's most adventurous and battling side, De Quincey focuses on their romantic and heroic features. The author's scandalous memoirs, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, about his laudanum addiction, were an overnight success. Therefore, De Quincey was likely not intimidated by the possibility of shocking his readers when he published Erauso's story in 1847. However, instead of a brawl, De Quincey decided to start his narrative with the tender, albeit tragic, moments surrounding the protagonist's birth, which were not mentioned in Ferrer's *Historia*. The 1847 French adaptation of *Historia* by Alexis de Valon—and main source for De Quincey's novella—does introduce some fictional details surrounding Erauso's first days, but while the French writer only devotes one paragraph to their birth, De Quincey fabricates a whole chapter on the topic. Set in San Sebastián in 1592, the opening chapter—pointedly titled 'An extra nuisance is introduced into Spain'—begins with a hidalgo—already

burdened by three daughters—who "received the disagreeable intelligence from a nurse, that his wife had just presented him with a [fourth] daughter" (*The Spanish* 3). The author contends that such "supernumerary daughters" constituted a systemic 'nuisance' to the Spanish elite, whose class identity he characterises through the tropes of "pride and laziness" (De Quincey, *The Spanish* 3). As a result, "aristocratic *daughters*, who constituted the hereditary torment of the true Castilian Don, were to be disposed of in the good old way; viz., by quartering them for life upon nunneries" (De Quincey, *The Spanish* 3-4; italics in the original). As Virtudes Serrano observes, "De Quincey, con indiscutible ingenio, no sólo inventa situaciones, modifica las existentes o suprime otras, sino que, apartándose de la historia, deja oír su voz en digresiones críticas sobre la materia novelada, o sobre la vida y costumbres de los españoles, contra los que lanza constantes ataques" (22).

In the novel, the infant is therefore immediately dispatched to a convent and christened Catalina de Erauso—also referred to as 'Kate' by the author. Unlike Palma's *tradición*, De Quincey consistently employs feminine pronouns to describe his heroine throughout the narrative, even while Erauso presents as a man—Pietro Diaz. While we cannot ascertain with certainty how Erauso identified, historical records confirm they alternated between living as a woman and later as a man. Accordingly, I will use the pronouns employed by the authors otherwise defaulting to gender-neutral pronouns 'they/them.'

While celebrating his heroine's strengths, De Quincey's narrative emphasises her compassionate, noble, and gentle attributes, constraining her character within conventional feminine ideals: "Catalina was impetuous and aspiring, violent sometimes, headstrong and haughty towards those who presumed upon her youth, absolutely rebellious against all open harshness, but still generous and most forgiving, disdainful of petty arts, and emphatically a noble girl. She was gentle, if people would let her be so. But woe to those that took liberties with her!" (*The Spanish* 7; italics in the original). The narrative proceeds to recount how, at the age of fifteen, Kate rejected the confines of her convent, opting instead for a life of adventure—a decisive act that marked both a literal and symbolic crossing: from the prescriptive social hierarchies of the Old World to the fluid possibilities of self-fashioning of the New World.

Erauso's departure from the convent serves as the catalyst for a transition that is simultaneously trans-Atlantic, trans-national, and—perhaps—'trans-gender' in its performance. While classifying a 17th-century figure as 'lesbian' or 'trans' presents significant anachronistic challenges, the protagonist nonetheless exhibits clear resistance to the heteronormative structures that sought to confine them to a 'feminine' sphere—in this case, a convent. This resistance aligns with Adrienne Rich's observation that while heterosexuality is positioned as a 'natural' and unquestioned norm, non-normative identities are perpetually subjected to a

mandate for interpretation (2003, 17). There is a certain asymmetry at play from a sociolinguistic perspective: while the cisgender subject is considered 'unmarked,' those who transgress gender boundaries are placed in a 'marked' category, demanding justification. Both Palma and De Quincey, therefore, strive to 'explain' Erauso's situation, respectively making cross-dressing the result of the pursuit of 'adventure' or 'freedom.'

Ferrer's *Historia* is replete with allusions to the protagonist's romantic liaisons with other women, but as Fernando Rodríguez Mansilla notes, any reference to homoeroticism would have been unthinkable in the 17th century, especially in territories controlled by the watchful eye of the Spanish Inquisition (813-14). Because of this relentless menace, while *Historia* does mention Erauso's indiscretions, it also hastily reminds its readers of the former nun's unyielding chastity (813-14). Such an erasure of desire is something 20th and 21st-century feminist theorists like Monique Wittig and Sara Ahmed have long recognised, noting that women have been traditionally viewed as 'parenthetical' to men, their identity dictated by a secondary role in patriarchal kinship (Ahmed 216). Wittig goes so far as to say that the 'lesbian' is not considered a 'woman' in the traditional sense as she eludes the heteronormative binary of servitude and domination (20). In shunning her domestic and reproductive duties, the 'lesbian' declines the directive to 'become' or 'remain' heterosexual (Wittig 20; Ahmed 216). Adrienne Rich takes it a step further, positing that 'compulsory heterosexuality' is the linchpin of patriarchal power and therefore the 'lesbian' is a symbol of resistance to institutional control (1980, 648-59).⁹

In his *tradiciones*, Palma seems fond of his 'manly' heroines, who make frequent appearances in his stories. In "¡A iglesia!" and "Mujer-Hombre" he gives us Erauso and Antonio Ita, but he also portrays other famed real-life women who contravened gender roles: the brave bullfighter Juana Breña in "Juana la marimacho," and the combative Manuela Sáenz in "La Protectora y la Libertadora," an influential force behind Latin America's independence movements. These heroines, however, make only temporary incursions into the domain of men and do not take on permanent masculine identities as Erauso or Ita do. Tellingly, the portrayal of their amorous affairs differs significantly: while Palma is eager to stress Sáenz's dealings with men—as Simón Bolívar's lover—he says nothing of Breña's love life.

Despite the numerous references to Erauso's same-sex—albeit non-sexual—relationships in 17th-century *Historia*, neither Palma nor De Quincey stress their liaisons. In "¡A iglesia!" Palma references the protagonist's relationships only at the end of his *tradición*, using the conclusion not to develop romantic or sexual dimensions but to underscore Erauso's chastity:

[De don Antonio se dijo que] murió, en un pueblo de Méjico, de más de setenta años de edad; que no abandonó el vestido de hombre y que no pecó nunca contra la castidad, bien que

fingiéndose varón engatusó con carantoñas y chicleos a más de tres doncellas, dándoles palabra de casamiento y poniendo tierra de por medio o llamándose Andana en el lance de cumplir lo prometido. (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*; italics added for emphasis)¹⁰

Given Palma's simultaneous conservatism and anticlerical tendencies, his stance on Erauso's sexuality could be interpreted either as an attack on the 'artificial nature' of clerical celibacy, or as a condemnation of women who refused to accept their 'assigned' gender in society. Then again, Palma may have sought to provoke his more puritanical audience, readers who were simultaneously scandalised and attracted by Erauso's behaviour and adventures. In drafting a 'woman' who transgresses gender boundaries and adopts the 'superior virtues' of men, Palma is likely building a narrative that extolls national identity by highlighting the bravery of those who venture into the New World even when they happen to be (former) women.

In his portrayal of Erauso, De Quincey neutralises his heroine's sexuality in much the same fashion as Palma did. But where Palma foregoes his protagonist's sexual encounters in order to highlight their most violent and audacious exploits, De Quincey emphasises her romantic side as a brave, but tragic, heroine. He depicts his heroine as a figure of destiny, downplaying her transgressive sexuality and gender identity to maintain reader sympathy within a European Romantic framework. As mentioned earlier, while Palma unhesitatingly uses the pronoun '*él*' to validate his protagonist's identity as 'Antonio,' De Quincey adheres almost exclusively to feminine pronouns, effectively re-gendering his 'Kate' despite their outward masculine performance.

In De Quincey's narrative, Catalina's relationships with women are described in terms of friendship. In Sherry Velasco's terms, "the Lieutenant Nun is de-lesbianised and reconstructed into a heterosexual or asexual figure" (88). Juana, one of the women Catalina encounters in her travels, wholly accepts the young soldier as male—a delusion that, the De Quincey notes, "formed a brief lull for Catalina" (*The Spanish* 54). The narrative conceptualises Erauso as an unwilling object of other women's passions, initiating relationships carefully reinterpreted as 'sisterly love' to accommodate Victorian sensibilities. By stripping Erauso's sexuality, De Quincey and, to a lesser extent, Palma, present cross-dressing as a necessary disguise for their adventurous life rather than a core aspect of their identity.

While Erauso's sexuality challenges interpersonal norms, their constant negotiation with ecclesiastical authority reflects a deeper, systemic anxiety regarding the stability of the divine order. In exploring the religious symbology within Palma and De Quincey's works, it becomes clear that both authors engage in a theological negotiation concerning the limits of identity under the watchful eye of the Church. Within the British literary tradition, Matthew Lewis's Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796) offers another compelling exploration of cross-dressing within religious contexts.

Whereas Erauso escapes the convent to embrace a secular, 'masculine' life, in Lewis's novel, Rosario—a young novice later revealed to be the cross-dressed Matilda—infiltrates the monastery to pursue her forbidden desire for Ambrosio, the titular monk. De Quincey's biographical essay *Joan of Arc* (1847) also engages with the trope of cross-dressing in a religious context where the homonymous protagonist claimed to be acting under divine guidance.

Notoriously anticlerical, Palma incorporates some religious imagery and elements associated with superstition in his *tradiciones* without hiding his disapproving perspective. In Palma's *tradición* "Mujer-Hombre," the author notes that narratives like Erauso's were far from exceptional. The text recounts the story of Antonio Ita—or Yta—, born María Leocadia Álvarez, a runaway nun from the Kingdom of Spain in 1770 or 1771. Palma opens his *tradición* by framing Erauso's rebellion against ecclesiastical norms as a recurring feminine phenomenon, asserting that: "No fue en América doña Catalina de Erauso, bautizada en la historia colonial con el sobrenombre de la monja alférez, la única hija de Eva ni la sola monja que cambiara las faldas de su sexo por el traje y costumbres varoniles" (*Tradiciones peruanas*). Ita's love interest, Martina Bilbao, "mestiza de vida pecaminosa," was also confined to a monastery due to her 'scandalous' life (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*).

In "¡A iglesia!" the religious focus is part of the title itself. In the first fight scene, the author describes thirty-year-old Erauso knocking on the door and requesting to join the 'twelve' Spanish diners playing dice (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*). Although one of the players remarks that "nada bueno nos ha de traer quien viene a completar el número trece," the group allows the young man to join the game (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*). The number thirteen has long been associated with bad omens, and the author appears to draw a connection between this superstition and the biblical imagery of the Last Supper, during which twelve apostles dined with Jesus Christ. In this context, the thirteenth person may be associated with either Judas Iscariot, the traitor, or Jesus Christ, the betrayed—both of whom ultimately meet their demise as a direct consequence of Judas's act of treachery.

The intrusion of a 'false man' into the religious imagery of the Last Supper may serve as a subtle critique of the Church, given Palma's frequent attacks on the clergy—especially the Jesuit order. In *Anales de la inquisición de Lima* (1863), the author portrays Christian institutions as decadent and lascivious, stating that during the colonial period, "[h]ay pueblos en los que las novias, desde ocho días antes de contraer matrimonio, son depositadas en casa del cura, y á nadie escandaliza el que éste cobre el derecho de pernada" (247). Other notable examples where Palma ridicules the sanctity of the Church include "Un calembourg," where the author mocks the Eucharist (Palma, *Tradiciones en salsa* 49); "El clavel disciplinado," which condemns the 'discipline' of the cloister as a scheme to conceal the worldly appetites of the clergy;

and "La endemoniada," where Palma reimagines demonic possession as a convenient excuse for the clerical abuse of women (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*).

Palma's references to the intrusion of a woman into a male-dominated Christian space are also present in his *tradición* "Los apóstoles y la Magdalena" (1894), where, according to the narrative, in 1657, a gang that spread terror in Potosí was led by a woman accompanied by twelve thieves, nicknamed "los doce apóstoles." Here, the woman also infiltrates the public and political space of men, and, like a 'false prophet,' commands her disciples, effectively replacing none other than Jesus Christ within the symbolic space represented by the gang. However, the narrative suggests, she ends up impersonating Judas, and, as a result, it is not Magdalena who dies, but rather all her 'apostles,' who are captured and hanged, while the woman manages to escape justice. These narratives exemplify the changing attitudes toward women, praising their courage, when emulating the 'higher' virtues of men, but also illustrating the devastating consequences caused when the 'inversion' of social and gender norms is taken too far, ultimately undermining and disrupting the social fabric.

According to Fernando Rodríguez Mansilla, while the fight scene in "¡A iglesia!" is based on two episodes from Ferrer's *Historia* (chapters XI-XII), Palma amplifies Antonio's role in the conflict to foreground the protagonist's belligerence (Rodríguez Mansilla 809). Palma's narrative strategy appears doubly motivated: first, to embed Erauso within a nationalist discourse that valorises traits like independence, cunning, hypermasculinity, and survivalism as counterpoints to Spanish colonial 'obscurantism'; and second, to critique the pervasive superstition that enables the Church's ideological control. This duality culminates in the titular phrase's origin story "a iglesia me llamo," which is not present in *Historia*. After being condemned for his extensive criminal record, the unrepentant lieutenant escapes execution by exploiting the credulity of a confessor—a moment that simultaneously underscores his cunning and satirises clerical naivety:

El sacerdote había entrado en la capilla y confesado al reo; pero al darle la comunión, éste le arrebató la Hostia y partió a correr gritando: — ¡A iglesia me llamo! ¡A iglesia me llamo! ¿Quién podía atreverse a detener al que llevaba entre sus manos, enseñándola a la muchedumbre, la divina Forma? "Si el alferez había cometido un sacrilegio, pensaba el religioso pueblo, ¿no lo sería también hacer armas sobre quien traía consigo el pan eucarístico?." Ese hombre era, pues, sagrado. Se llamaba a iglesia. ... (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*)

By taking refuge in the Church and fleeing to the temple of Santa Clara with a consecrated host in his hand, Antonio was deemed untouchable by the superstitious community of colonial Guamanga: "La justicia humana no alcanzaba entonces a los que se acogían al sagrado del templo" (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*). There, the lieutenant confessed before the bishop of Guamanga and, to everyone's astonishment, was not executed. Instead, he was cloistered in a convent of nuns to the extent that

"[e]l escándalo tomaba de día en día mayores creces en el católico pueblo" (*Tradiciones peruanas*).

Although De Quincey's novel omits the episode of the stolen Eucharist, much like his Peruvian counterpart, the British author extensively explored the subject of religion in his writings. This interest is particularly demonstrated in volumes IV and VII of *The Works of Thomas De Quincey* (1877), which include *Essays on Christianity, Paganism, and Superstition* (1877) and *Protestantism and other essays* (1863). De Quincey strongly identified as a Protestant, framing the Church of England as the sole arbiter of 'true religion' while dismissing alternative belief systems as rooted in the falsehoods of paganism and superstition (Slaby 1-3). However, like Palma, De Quincey emphasises the corruption and hypocrisy he perceived in organised religion. Nearing the end of his novel, a Frenchman is described as "a gloomy fanatic" and "a religious sycophant" for doubting Erauso's faith and the manner of her prayer (*The Spanish* 42). In order to protect his heroine's devotion, the author intervenes in the narrative, declaring that even he "could not love a woman that never bent her knee in thankfulness or in supplication" (42).

Departing from the more secular or ironic treatments found in the *Historia* and '¡A iglesia!', De Quincey seeks to rehabilitate his protagonist through a providential lens. By framing her incursions into the masculine sphere as a form of spiritual trial, he effectively transfigures Erauso into a paragon of divine virtue, thereby reconciling her gender transgressions with a higher moral order:

It is impossible to be noble in many things, without having many points of contact with true religion. If you deny *that*, you it is that calumniate religion. Kate was noble in many things. Her worst errors never took a shape of self-interest or deceit. She was brave, she was generous, she was forgiving, she bore no malice, she was full of truth - qualities that God loves either in man or woman. She hated sycophants and dissemblers. I hate them; ... Violent people are not always such from choice, but perhaps from situation. (De Quincey, *The Spanish* 43-44, italics in the original)

De Quincey further attempts to reconcile Erauso's identity with a providential moral order by ascribing to her a latent, redemptive desire for domesticity. He posits that she was haunted by "day-dreams of tranquillity" as "[s]he yearned, at many times, for the rest which is not in camps or armies" (*The Spanish* 44).

In a marked departure from De Quincey's sentimentalised prose, Stephanie Merrim observes that the memoirs attributed to Erauso in *Historia* exhibit a distinctly masculine—"laconic and wiry"—narrative style (181). Rather than a penitent heroine, Erauso comes across as the archetype of male 'valor': individualistic, unrepentant, and emotionless (Merrim 180-81). The memoirs put forward a character with no taste for heroism or religious piety; one who has a fondness for violence and holds conventional femininity in contempt (Merrim 181). Erauso's 'dry' personality is echoed by the

structure of the chapters in *Historia*, as they "[t]ypically begin with a brief background, set forth the problem, and end with Erauso escaping it, unwilling or unable to resolve it" (180). Even when Erauso takes to the convents, it is more a matter of pragmatism than faith, as they opportunistically seek asylum when cornered in a life-or-death situation (181).

4. Conclusions

In the 19th century, the double-edged portrayal of the 'manly woman' as both the object of sexualization and desexualisation, could be considered the result of a phenomenon described by Foucault a century later: in the same text, we may perceive an urge to 'unveil' and categorize 'deviant' identities and sexualities—an "incitement to discourse"—intertwined with the satisfaction derived from the regulation and institutional discrimination of nonconforming individuals (45-47, 49). According to De Quincey, Erauso had a "thick skin," but "not literally, for she was fair and blooming, and eminently handsome, having such a skin, in fact, as became a young woman of family in northernmost Spain ... as to delicacy, she never lost sight of that kind which peculiarly concerns her sex" (*The Spanish* 9). The author even interjects in his narrative asserting: "Bonny Kate! Noble Kate! I would there were not two centuries laid between us, so that I might have the pleasure of kissing thy fair hand" (33).

Just like in *Historia*, Erauso's clandestine life in De Quincey and Palma's narratives ends with the 'discovery' of Erauso's 'sex' after they are examined by doctors and nurses. In this context, the lieutenant's body functions as a living manifestation of Lotman's 'semiosphere.' An intersectional character, Erauso embodies 'liminality' as a person who lives 'in-between' different spheres—crossing borders and cross-dressing. The 'center' of their body is considered their 'real,' 'feminine' space that must be 'uncovered,' while the 'external' parts present them as 'masculine' and is subject of variation and interpretation. It is a challenging 'outside' that works to reinterpret what is 'inside.'

Regarding Erauso's final years, both De Quincey and Palma reflect the facts presented in *Historia*, stressing the dual dispensation from King Philip IV and Pope Urban VIII that officially sanctioned their continued use of male attire and lifestyle. One need only look at these remarkable dispensations to see that 17th-century Spanish gender norms were a matter of social standing rather than biological essentialism (Laqueur 8). Erauso's situation is telling in this regard; it shows how their role in service to the Crown, reinforced by the mitigating circumstances of their celibacy, could legitimise their departure from the 'feminine' sphere (Aresti 401-02).

Unlike the matter-of-fact representations of Erauso in *Historia*, De Quincey describes the adventures and passing of his heroine in romantic terms: "The sea was searched for her—the forests were ransacked. But the sea did not give up its dead, if

there indeed she lay; and the forests made no answer to the sorrowing hearts which sought her amongst them" (*The Spanish* 79). In contrast, Palma's *tradición* crafts a concise conclusion that resembles more closely Erauso's memoirs:

Bástenos consignar que doña Catalina de Erauzo regresó de España; que cansada de aventuras ejerció el oficio de arriero en Veracruz, y que murió, en un pueblo de Méjico, de más de setenta años de edad; que no abandonó el vestido de hombre y que no pecó nunca contra la castidad, bien que fingiéndose varón engatusó con carantoñas y chicoleos a más de tres doncellas, dándoles palabra de casamiento y poniendo tierra de por medio o llamándose Andana en el lance de cumplir lo prometido. (Palma, *Tradiciones peruanas*)

While Palma's irreverent tone may suggest an attempt to downplay Erauso's gender subversion, this attitude could be interpreted as a byproduct of his efforts to integrate the 'Lieutenant Nun' into the national narrative of Creole courage, independence, and picaresque. De Quincey, on the other hand, with his Romantic interpretation of Erauso's story, obliterated her sexuality altogether, presenting her not as one who acts of her own volition but as a tragic figure at the mercy of fate. In order to make the protagonist palatable to the Victorians, De Quincey neutralized the homoerotic undercurrents of *Historia* by simply redefining any feminine attraction as 'sisterly love' (Velasco 85-87). Ultimately, while De Quincey's narrative abides by European Romantic conventions, sanitizing the tale and wiping away any trace of its 'queer' potentialities, Palma transforms Erauso into a liminal figure through which emerging national identities are negotiated and consolidated.

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Notes

- 1 Terms such as 'effeminate' or 'manly' are used here in order to reproduce their usages and meanings in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, otherwise giving precedence to more acceptable terms today proposed by LGBT+ communities. Nowadays, the term 'gay' is often preferred over 'homosexual' due to the medical connotations associated with the latter.
- 2 Although it remains uncertain whether medieval cross-dressed individuals such as Pelagia/Pelagius of Antioch, Marina/Marinos, and Eugenia/Eugenius were historical figures or

products of legend, their narratives are preserved in Byzantine hagiographies and sacred texts composed between the 4th and 6th centuries (Grayson 138, 143).

- 3 For further information on Elena/Eleno de Céspedes, see the Archivo Histórico Nacional de Madrid: Sección Inquisición, Legajo 234, expediente 24 (<https://pares.mcu.es/ParesBusqueda20/catalogo/show/4580314>).
- 4 Hannah Snell's (James Gray) memoirs were published in London by Robert Walker and are now available under the title *The Female Soldier; Or, The Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell* <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36461/36461-h/36461-h.htm>
- 5 In French literature, it is also noteworthy to highlight the play titled *Gabriel* (1839), by woman playwright George Sand, where the eponymous protagonist is assigned female at birth but raised and educated as a boy in 17th-century Italy.
- 6 Palma fought to legitimise the Peruvian and Latin American language varieties in essays such as *Papeletas lexicográficas* (1903).
- 7 This manuscript, in turn, is allegedly based on another text authored by Cándido María Trigueros (Vallbona 17). According to Ferrer, these works derive from an original manuscript about the life of Catalina de Erauso, purportedly authored by Erauso themselves, and published in 1625 by Bernardino de Guzmán. However, no such volume has ever been discovered (Vallbona 27).
- 8 According to the Glossary of Terms of The Human Rights Campaign, an association defending LGBTQ+ communities, the term 'transgender' is used "An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc." (The Human).
- 9 A comprehensive study on the concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' can be found in Gayle Rubin's essay "The Traffic in Women. Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" (1975).
- 10 Here, the phrase "Llamarse andana" mirrors its colloquial use that refers to the act of evading or disregarding a commitment (Real Academia Española).