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# Defining desire: (Re)storying a "fraudulent" marriage in 1901 Spain

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**Abstract**

In the second half of the 19th century, two Spanish primary school teachers were married despite the fact that their legal status as women rendered this union not only illegal but also publicly scandalous. In 2008 their story was resurrected in the form of a book based on an extensive review of educational, legal, and media archives. The Spanish press responded to the book's publication by embedding the events within a more recent historical narrative around the struggle for gay marriage rights. In this article, we analyze the events in light of the understandings of sex, gender and sexuality that were available at the time, and then explore both the continuities and discontinuities with the modern interpretive framework that affords these women a lesbian identity, drawing upon Bennett's notion of "lesbian-like" practices in eras where such identities were not yet conceptualized.

**Keywords**

Identity, lesbian, marriage, queer, Spain

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## Introduction: A historical event and its modern interpretations

In the second half of the 19th century, two Spanish primary school teachers, Elisa Sánchez Loriga and Marcela Gracia Ibeas, were married despite the fact that their legal status as women rendered this union not only illegal but also publicly scandalous. Pursued by legal authorities in three countries (Spain, Portugal, and Argentina) and subject to intense scrutiny by print media in these and various other national contexts, the two protagonists had fallen into anonymity by the turn of the 21st century. In 2008 their story was resurrected in the form of a book based on an extensive review of educational, legal, and media archives (De Gabriel, 2008).[1] Although the empirical primary data examined here come from the book, which remains the only published secondary source to date, we provide here an analysis of these events using a theoretical and interpretive framework that was not present in the original publication. The public debate around these events is likely to continue, as in the spring of 2018, Spanish filmmaker Isabel Coixet completed production of a film based on the events described in this book, to be released in 2019.

The Spanish press responded to the book's publication in 2008 by embedding the events within a more recent historical narrative around the struggle for gay marriage rights. Just three years before the book came out, Spain had passed a law permitting same-sex marriage (Ley 13/2005). An article in *El País* (Ramírez, 2010), the nation's most widely read newspaper, situated the experiences of Elisa and Marcela in this particular (modern) context before beginning to relate their story:

> More than 2,000 lesbian women have been married in Spain thanks to [former president] Zapatero's Law of 2005. But this social advancement has a surprising precedent: Marcela and Elisa were married in A Coruña in 1901. By the [Catholic] church. But they were discovered, persecuted by the law, and mercilessly attacked by the press. A valiant feminist history now published in the form of a book.

Spanish public radio took a similar approach. In a broadcast entitled 'Precocious homosexualities' (Gallego, 2010), Elisa and Marcela's union is described as "a great precedent to homosexual marriages in our country."

This situated interpretation is echoed by Wikipedia (both Spanish and English versions), which relates the story under the title *First Same-Sex Marriage in Spain*, explaining that in order to achieve the marriage, "Elisa had to adopt a male identity" (Wikipedia, 2018). More recent press reports on the upcoming film have also celebrated the story in similar terms, for example as "a rare opportunity to make lesbian relationships more visible" (Badcock, 2018). In this sense, 21st-century understandings coupled with an equalities agenda have contributed to the definition of desires and identities in ways that were unavailable to the protagonists at the turn of the 20th century. Indeed, while the concept of sexual identity underlying masculine homoerotic behavior had already taken shape in Spain by the end of the

19th century – in the form of “sexual invert” or “aesthete” – (Cleminson and Vázquez, 2007: 29–94), such an identity was considerably less developed and visible in the case of female homoeroticism, at least at the time these events took place (Vázquez García and Moreno Mengíbar, 2006: 217–224).

In this article, we wish to reexamine and reinterpret this story using a queer theory lens, in order to critically interrogate the identity narrative offered by modern press representations: the marriage of two lesbians, one of whom had to adopt a fictitious male identity to trick the Catholic Church into sanctioning the union. Harris and Gray (2014: 10) define “queer” not as an identity category but rather “an analytical device that... allows us, as researchers, to trouble the ways in which power, language and the discursive (re)production of gender and sexual identities both play out within educational spaces.” This perspective also echoes Foucault’s (1981) understanding of queer as not so much about sexual acts per se but about the ways in which non-heterosexual relationships exceed, and therefore disrupt, the boundaries of society, “Homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities – not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the ‘slantwise’ position of the latter as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light.”[2]

Halberstam (2005), in *In a Queer Place and Time*, understands queer as not only spatially but also temporally bounded, so the specific ways in which gender and sexuality are (re) produced will be defined by the available interpretive categories of the time. Foucault (1979) has argued that homosexuality as an ontological concept (literally, a “species”) developed in the 19th century. It was around this time that same-sex attraction began to be contained within a recognizable category: until then, people might feel such attraction and act upon it, but they could not *be* homosexual. Along with the emergence of the homosexual came a whole range of disciplinary actions, ranging from disapproval and shame to legal sanctions, actions that themselves are spatially and temporally bounded.

We will first describe the events as they unfolded, based on archived documentation, and then analyze them in light of the understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality that were available at the time. We explore both the continuities and discontinuities with the modern interpretive framework that affords these women a lesbian identity, drawing upon Bennett’s (2000) notion of “lesbian-like” practices in eras where such identities were not yet conceptualized.

## The story of Elisa and Marcela

We recreate and summarize here the story as it was presented in the original Galician-language publication that brought these events to public attention (De Gabriel, 2008). It is important to keep in mind that the events of this story have been reconstructed from news articles and archival documentation – which means that already some informal interpretation has taken place. This is particularly evident in print media reports, which even provided “verbatim” representations

of interactions that had taken place several years earlier. At the same time, the couple left no first-person testimony in the form of personal diaries or correspondence, which means that we have no direct evidence relating to the couple's relationship, or to their own interpretations of their experiences.

Our two protagonists met around the mid-1880s when Elisa was approximately 23 years old and Marcela was about 18. Marcela was born in the city of Burgos, where she lived for the first 10 years of her life until her father, a military man, was reassigned to the Galician city of A Coruña.[3] Elisa was born in A Coruña in 1862; her father died and her mother later remarried. When they met, Elisa, having already earned her teaching credential, was working at the teacher's college where Marcela was completing her studies. While such relationships were not unusual and were usually considered to be innocuous, in this case Marcela's family disapproved of what they perceived as an overly intense need to be together constantly, which seemed to take precedence over family obligations. When her family decided to send her to Madrid for a while in order to establish some healthy distance, Marcela protested grievously and Elisa even went to the extreme of confronting Marcela's father, but to no avail.

After the four months of enforced separation, Marcela returned to find that Elisa had taken a substitute (supply) teaching position in a small town. Marcela also took a substitute teaching position in a nearby town, and it is evident from their job applications that the two were attempting to find work near each other and, perhaps, beyond the reach of Marcela's disapproving family in the city. Over the course of the next few years Elisa took only occasional teaching positions so the couple could live together, with Elisa taking charge of the domestic chores.

The idea of two female teachers living together was not particularly unusual for the time. What did begin to attract attention and inspire gossip in the local community of Dumbría were the occasional violent episodes of what would now undoubtedly qualify as domestic violence. Nevertheless, the couple remained together until one day, after a particularly violent fight which was witnessed by the neighbors, Elisa disappeared, telling everyone that she was going to stay with relatives in Havana, Cuba.

However, what she really did was retreat to the nearby city to transform herself into her fictional cousin Mario. She cut her hair, began to dress in men's clothing, took up smoking, cultivated a modest moustache, and began to court Marcela from afar. Marcela began to read extracts of her letters from Mario aloud to her neighbors, extolling the virtues of her new suitor and emphasizing his eerie similarity to his cousin Elisa, "I've never seen anything more similar to Elisa. They are the same height, they have the same voice and mannerisms, even the same temper! In fact, if they weren't a women and a man, it would seem like they were the same person" (De Gabriel, 2008: 32). Indeed, such an elaborate scheme suggests a great deal of advance planning, and raises questions about the extent to which some of the turbulence which eventually (supposedly) ended the relationship might have been staged, or at least exaggerated, to pave the way for the (re)introduction of Mario. We may also infer from the degree of strategic planning involved that

Marcela was fully complicit – by no means a mere victim of her partner's bizarre plot, which was the interpretation presented by the print media upon discovering Elisa's cross-dressing scheme.

In order to legally establish the existence of Mario, some sort of documentation would be needed. Mario declared to Catholic Church authorities that he had never been baptized, as his father had died before his birth and his mother had married an Englishman of the Protestant faith.[4] Mario claimed that he had been living in England surrounded by Protestants since the age of eight, a tactic that demonstrated a shrewd understanding of the Catholic Archbishop's current preoccupation with the threat of Protestant evangelism in the region. The Archbishop authorized Mario to become baptized in the Catholic Church, without the kind of background check that would have revealed the fraudulent nature of his foreign references.

Three days later, according to press reports, Mario passed his catechism training with flying colors. On the day of the baptism, he showed up in a dark suit and white hat, and when the time came to make the sign of the cross on his chest with salt as dictated by the traditional ceremony, he removed his tie and unbuttoned his shirt in a confident manner that, according to the informed hindsight of the local press, no one would have thought possible for a woman (De Gabriel, 2008: 35). On 8 June, 1901, the couple were legally married by the parish priest of the Church of San Xurxo in the city of A Coruña.

Unfortunately, the story does not end here. They returned to Dumbría, where their prior relationship (as Elisa and Marcela) had attracted the attention of their neighbors – their ruse had been discovered. Mario conceded that he was in fact the person they had known as Elisa, and communicated to the parish priest: "If until the 19th of May I was Elisa Sánchez Loriga, since the 8th of June I've been Mario José Sánchez Loriga, the hermaphrodite." An angry mob surrounded the couple's house, shouting for Elisa to emerge so they could determine her sex, once and for all. As a result, Elisa-Mario left Dumbría. Marcela felt compelled to admit that Mario was indeed Elisa, as her neighbors suspected, but added, "I want you all to know that Elisa is more man than woman. In fact, the only time we have evidence of either protagonist claiming an identity is when Elisa responds to such public accusation. When Mario's previous identity was uncovered, he responds by explicitly claiming to be a hermaphrodite, and Marcela publicly backs him up. Given that the couple's bahavior was not culturally legitimate at the time, they may well have decided to invoke nature as a way to justify themselves.

The different treatment received by their neighbors deserves particular attention. Once their scheme was exposed, Marcela was able to continue teaching for about two weeks, while Mario was forced to escape the rising tensions. It seems, therefore, that at least in the public eye, Mario's gender transgression was more serious than the sexual transgression committed by the couple.

Later that same month the news broke big in the print media with the headline "A marriage without a man" (De Gabriel, 2008: 117–118), and the couple felt compelled to flee to Porto, Portugal, where they were detained by the Portuguese

police at the request of Spanish legal authorities. Portuguese society, as reflected in press reports, was considerably more sympatric towards the couple than were their Spanish compatriots, and the Portuguese authorities eventually released them. Nevertheless, they still faced extradition to their home country. The story takes another strange turn here, as at this time Marcela gave birth to a baby girl in January 1902. While there was some speculation in the Portuguese press that the father was Elisa (as a hermaphrodite), and one source jokingly referred to spontaneous generation or "immaculate conception," most of the Portuguese and Spanish press attributed her pregnancy to relations with a male suitor in Dumbría.

There are two possible hypotheses regarding Marcela's pregnancy; it may have been either accidental or deliberate. The first seems more plausible; Elisa-Mario married Marcela in order to provide a father for her unborn child, allowing her to avoid the difficulties single motherhood would have presented for a young teacher. But there are at least three factors that might complicate this interpretation: First, the biological father was, apparently, also prepared to marry Marcela. Second, Galicia had one of the highest illegitimate birthrates in Europe at the time (Dubert, 2015). Third, while some Galician teachers were officially reprimanded in these cases, they were not expelled from the profession (De Gabriel, 2018). These historical details provide weight to the second hypothesis – that the pregnancy might have been jointly planned. They may have hoped that the child would provide their relationship with additional credibility. Mario and Marcela committed their one serious mistake in returning to Dumbría as man and wife. If they had only chosen another destination, they may well have lived out the rest of their days as just another married couple.

The couple expressed a joy at the birth of their daughter that was somewhat tempered by financial difficulties and the impending extradition. They decided to flee once more, this time to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Elisa, who was the principal focus of the Spanish authorities, decided to set sail first, followed about four months later by Marcela and the child. In Buenos Aires, they adopted new identities, but we will continue to use their original names to avoid further confusion.[5] At first they were happily reunited in the home of an Argentinian acquaintance, and according to Argentinian and Spanish press reports, lived comfortably. Nevertheless, the couple had to find work, and the domestic work that they eventually encountered required them once again to live separately.

In Buenos Aires, Elisa married again, this time to a 64-year-old Danish businessman, and they moved out to the countryside, where she refused to consummate the marriage. She was also reported to be extremely bad-tempered, and her spirits only seemed to rise when she finally received a visit from "her sister" Marcela, who arrived at the farm with her child in tow. Elisa's husband, suspicious of the motives of any woman who refused to have sex with her husband, tried to have the marriage annulled and pressed legal charges against his wife for contracting marriage under false pretense; that is, that Elisa really wasn't a woman at all. These allegations remained unsubstantiated, as a series of three medical exams concluded that

Elisa indeed was a woman. Nevertheless, her husband remained unconvinced despite her efforts, providing a curious contrast with her earlier (also unsuccessful) efforts to convince Spanish authorities that she was a man (De Gabriel, 2008: 92).

In the following sections, we will analyze these events in light of the understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality available at the time, and provide some tools for linking these interpretations with our own (modern) understandings.

## Lesbian history in Spain and postdichotomous thinking

The limited development of Spanish lesbian history[6] pales by comparison with that achieved in other European countries, such as France, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria (Herzog, 2009), and even more so with the flourishing field in Great Britain and the USA, where various analytical paradigms have emerged over the past 40 years (Vicinus, 2012).

A review of recent literature reveals successive efforts to surpass certain conceptual dichotomies, beginning with the conflict between essentialist and social constructivist approaches. It would be anachronistic to describe the behavior of the two women involved in these events as a latent and ahistorical expression of lesbianism, but it would also be an error to interpret these events through a sort of folk Foucauldian lens – that is, assuming that the time period recognized homoerotic acts without permitting consideration of homosexual subjectivities. As has been argued from Sedgwick (1990) to later constructivist perspectives, homoerotic lesbian subjectivities existed before the lesbianism defined by sexology, albeit without the introspective psychological focus and desire orientation characteristic of more recent definitions (Mak, 2004, 2012). In this sense, rather than a linear history describing an evolution from "acts" to identity, these authors propose a more complex reality of multiply coexisting times (Braudel, 1969), with the aim of capturing for each time period the constellation of available homoerotic subjectivities (Halperin, 2002; Vicinus, 2004).

Another dichotomy that has been called into question is the division between romantic friendships and women's sexual relations, a relic of research into Victorian-era "intimate friendships." In the 1990s, the notion of the "Boston marriage" (Rothblum and Brehony, 1993) was proposed to describe female cohabitation that lacked a sexual component. Thanks to studies such as those of Vicinus (2004) and Marcus (2007), we know that this division, established by Lillian Faderman and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's pioneering work, is actually quite unstable. We now recognize a continuum of women's relationships that runs from pure friendship to intense sexual involvement (Garton, 2012). It is only from this postdichotomous perspective that we can begin to understand the story of Elisa and Marcela, both in historical context and through our own current frame of reference. The analytical tools we use here are meant to establish a balance between difference and similarity, and between discontinuity and continuity with respect to the present.

## Discontinuity: The logics of sexual identity

To begin with, we must recognize difference. Historian Geertje Mak (2012), using a broad corpus of 19th-century clinical histories of hermaphroditism and sexual uncertainty, has identified three logics or rationalities concerning sexual identity. These logics coexisted at the beginning of the 20th century in a culture that did not make the distinctions we make today between sex, gender, and sexuality. This was the culture in which Elisa and Marcela lived.

In the first of these logics, also the oldest, sexual identity is assumed within the individual's assigned role in the social community. A person's sex is that which others recognize as appropriate for his or her physical and social appearance, in terms of dress, mannerism, and occupation. This concept is similar to that which Cleminson and Vázquez García (2013) have referred to as social "rank" or "stratum." This rationality tends to adopt a hierarchical and monistic understanding of the sexes, where woman is seen as a kind of inferior version of man (Laqueur, 1990). From this perspective, a woman who dresses like (and passes as) a man is a fraud, wrongfully attempting to raise her status in the community. Such an act would constitute a "social fraud" because it contributes to the destruction of what Robert D Putnam (1995: 67) calls "social capital", that is, the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". A medical consultation to reveal the "true sex" would only take place when the assumed identity was not recognized by the community, leading to a breakdown in the moral and social order and the disruption of the collectively assumed division of sexes. A doctor might intervene in these cases in order to uncover the fraud and restore social order (Mak, 2012) In this scenario, the revelation of the hidden sex was experienced as a dishonor to the individual in question as well as to his or her closest kin, an affront that would mean social isolation and loss of recognition.

The second logic, encoded within a later 19th-century concept that Alice Domurat Dreger (1998) called the gonadal criterion, equated sexual identity with objective bodily representation. An individual's sex was not related to social role, but rather could be revealed by a scientific examination of his or her biological features. By the end of the 19th century this biological marker was identified through microscopic examination of gonadal tissue. In this second logic, since sexual identity was seen as a strictly somatic reality, the possibility of intermediate figures such as "hermaphrodite," "menstruating man" or "mannish woman" was ruled out. The hierarchical and monistic model was replaced by a binary one that emphasized the difference between the sexes and their complementary nature.

Elisa's arguments claiming hermaphroditism, therefore, contradicted the medical cultural ideas of the time period. As Dreger (1998: 146–147) demonstrates, the widespread acceptance of the gonadal criterion during the final decades of the 19th century rendered the "true hermaphrodite" a completely exceptional and rare case. This criterion also took a firm hold in Spain, although somewhat later and in coexistence with other interpretations (Cleminson and Vázquez García, 2009: 108–110).

The third logic emerged around the same time that the second one had become established (Mak, 2012). The scientific community began to identify individuals who, while biologically recognized as male or female, felt that they belonged to the opposite sex. The concept of "uranianism" (Ulrich) and later "inverted sexual impulse" (Westphal, Magnan, Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis) were used to classify these cases. A new rationality was born: sexual identity was no longer conflated with social role or with the body, but was rooted in the psychological interior, so that one might have "a male soul within a woman's body" and vice versa. This internal intimacy of the personality was manifested in sexual preferences as well as in what we would refer to today as "gender roles."

These three logics identified by Mak operate, with differing importance, in the case of Elisa and Marcela. Therefore, the details of their story do not lend themselves to a unique and stable understanding. Instead, they can be understood differently, depending on the rationality employed in the interpretation.

## *Outrage and shame: The marriage of Elisa and Marcel as social breakdown*

Identity in terms of assigned social role is the prevailing logic in the case studied here. In Dumbría, the small Galician town where she was a teacher in 1899, Marcela seems to have enjoyed a certain respect on behalf of her neighbors. The community was well aware of Elisa's "dyke" tendencies: she was known as "The cop" for her brusque and even sometimes violent personality – she carried a revolver and is known to have challenged one of Marcela's suitors to a duel. Historians tend to associate homoerotic subcultures with the anonymity provided by larger cities as a result of industrial modernization. Nevertheless, rural environments could provide possibilities for women's intimate relationships whose sexual dimension was never subject to community interrogation. These small communities were able to maintain a degree of ignorance in order to preserve a social order that proved beneficial for everyone, in this case Marcela's successful role as the village teacher. This can be seen as an example of what Rachel H Cleves (2014) calls "the open secret of the closet."

It was what the field of transgender studies refers to as *the journey* (Vicinus, 2012) that made the difference here: – the physical changes experienced by Elisa in terms of dress and habits during the conversion to Mario. At the same time, Marcela prepared the scene with their neighbors, reading them excerpts from the letters she had received from her future husband. Marcela thus demonstrated a degree of initiative that did not correspond with the stereotypical role of "submissive lady" assigned to her by the press, which preferred to contrast her with the mannish Elisa.

When their neighbors discovered the charade, there were two transgressions that they seemed to find intolerable. First, there was an assault on the norms of the marriage market that placed the young men of Dumbría at a disadvantage, one of whom had been courting Marcela. Second, the fraudulent wedding vows and baptism constituted a desecration of these Catholic sacraments. The unusual speed and

efficiency of the administrative response also provide evidence of the gravity of these social ruptures: the education authorities quickly began professional disciplinary proceedings against Marcela – the only one teaching at the time – while the Church quickly annulled the marriage. Understood within this context, the superficial revisions performed by doctors Antonio Deus and Manuel Barbeito in response to Elisa/Mario's claim of hermaphroditism also served to provide evidence of fraud and to restore the social order disrupted by the women's behavior. At stake in these medical examinations was the social identity in terms of social role, the "I" recognized by others as part of the community's division of the sexes.

Media allusions to the women's "sapphism" and to the "lesbian" nature of their relations (De Gabriel, 2008: 223–224) can also be situated within this perspective of sexual identity as assigned social role. These notions, outside of psychiatric texts and the emerging field of sexology, did not refer to a psychological interior marked by sexual orientations or propensities. They refer to moral "excesses," libertine tendencies associated with the most decadent nobility, rather than pathological deviations. In Felipe Trigo's novela *Thirst for Love* (1903), inspired by the women's story, their erotic attraction is presented as a circumstantial element, a "lady's game" lacking in psychological depth.

Elisa and Marcela's own experiences, as transmitted by the press, were expressed within this logic of identity as assigned social role. While they were imprisoned in Porto, Portugal, they presented their case as a temporary moment of insanity that resulted in their disgrace and misfortune (De Gabriel, 2008: 67–74). At no time did they ever describe their behavior in terms of individual self-expression. The explication they offered to justify their marriage and to gain public favor, which in fact was the most widely cited version, was based on the recuperation of honor. It might have been a mistake for Elisa to transform into Mario and to enter into fraudulent marriage with Marcela, but it was all for a noble goal – to protect Marcela from a violent and impetuous suitor and to avoid the unsavory reputation of single mother, since she was pregnant by one of the local men.

Finally, public commentary connecting Elisa's transition from woman to man with the Spanish and international tradition of masculine women can also be situated within the logic of sex as assigned social role, or "sexual stratum." In a 1901 article, the Galician author Emilia Pardo Bazán placed Elisa's transition in the tradition of Catalina de Erauso, the Chevalier D'Eon and Feliciana Enríquez de Guzmán, a veritable dynasty of robust masculine women, and highlighted the Galician teacher's "uncommon intelligence" and extraordinary ability." Pardo Bazán even went so far as to call for freedom of attire, suggesting that Elisa's cross-dressing should not be criminalized (De Gabriel, 2008: 307–310). In this case, the figure of the virile woman is not invoked to denigrate or ridicule, but to praise her intelligence and courage. In this "identity regimen of the past," the subject's sex was a mask that could be worn or removed, and it is as if by such a transition, the protagonist was able to achieve "sexual self-improvement" (Mak, 2012: 47).

## The somatic criterion: Elisa/Mario as biological woman

While the predominant logic in the case of Elisa and Marcela was to understand sexual identity in terms of assigned social roles, the other two logics described by Mak were present, albeit in a relatively lesser role.

Five different doctors examined Elisa, in order to determine her sexual identity. The first two of these examinations were conducted in the city of A Coruña, some 80 kilometers northeast of the village of Dumbría. Both of these medical exams were based on the assumption that sexual identity was rooted in apparent genital morphology. There was never any reference to the discrepancy between Elisa's lived experience and the observed somatic sex. Neither was any reference ever made to the psycho-pathological taxonomies employed by psychiatrists of the time period. Sex was considered in these instances to be nothing more than what the body represented, and was completely disassociated from its moral and community context.

This same logic of sex as somatic reality was also deployed in the second series of medical revisions that Elisa underwent in Buenos Aires, when her husband pressed charges against her. Christian Jensen filed for annulment on the grounds that, among other factors, his wife was not a woman. The presiding Argentinian judge ordered three medical examinations, all of which unanimously declared Elisa to be female. Since the text of the ruling is not available, we must rely on media reports of the case. According to one account published in 1904 (De Gabriel, 2016: 37),[7] the medial report included technical details concerning Elisa's "physical constitution" that "explained why the marriage contracted with Jensen was never able to be consecrated." Nevertheless, the three doctors concluded that Jensen's wife was indeed a woman, and the journalist recommended that he "forgive her for her minor physical defect. Being of an age where this situation was no longer that important." In sum, it seems unlikely that the Argentinian medical experts went beyond anatomical configuration in their determination of Elisa's sexual identity.

Elisa's claim of hermaphroditism clearly served to defend the legitimacy of her marriage to Marcela, who supported the claim. When the authorities in Porto detained the couple, Elisa "admitted" to being a woman, but Marcela continued to stick with the hermaphrodite explanation. We also know that Elisa was an avid reader of medical texts, although the only one we can identify specifically is a book dealing with the elements of legal medicine. These kinds of writings addressed what were referred to at the time as hermaphroditism and pseudo hermaphroditism, as confirmed by Hofmann (1882) and Yáñez (1884).

In light of these texts, perhaps Elisa took into consideration both sexual preference and the "minor physical defect" referred to by the Argentinian press to self-diagnose a condition of "masculine pseudo hermaphroditism." Marcela seems to corroborate this hypothesis in her comment that her partner could act as man or woman, but was more the former than the latter. In any case, there is no evidence to suggest that Elisa was familiar with sexological taxonomies of the time, specifically with the notion of "sexual inversion." Her access to expert knowledge

was limited to the concept of "hermaphrodite", which encoded the subject's sex in terms of simple anatomical reality.

## *From social fraud to pathology: Elisa and Marcela as sexual inverts*

On the other hand, the notion of "sexual invert" operates within a completely different logic of sexual identity. Here sex is not seen as a mask inscribed in social relations, and neither is it conflated with anatomy. This concept situates the sexual "I" within the psychological interior of the individual. A person's sex constitutes an essential nexus of his or her personality, fixed from early childhood and manifested in terms of behaviors, sensibilities, emotions and, of course, sexual orientation.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the notion of "sexual inversion" was quite common in Spanish psychiatry and criminal anthropology, with the spread of degeneration theory (Campos Marín et al., 2001) and the ongoing debate over Lombrosian anthropology (Galera, 1991; Maristany, 1973). Given its availability, it is actually surprising that sexual inversion failed to play any part in Elisa and Marcela's judiciary process. The Spanish Penal Code of 1870, following the Napoleonic tradition, did not punish homoerotic relations as long as they did not produce "public scandal" and did not involve minors. Nevertheless, the crime of "dishonest abuse" – "he who commits dishonest abuse with a person of the same or the other sex" – was occasionally invoked in cases of sodomy or pederasty (Cleminson and Vázquez García, 2007: 36–37). This was not the case with Elisa and Marcela: while references to sexual deviance appeared in some press reports, such references were never present throughout the judicial process. Throughout the charges of public scandal and falsification, there was no reference to a possible mental illness without delusion or "impulse disorders," terms usually associated with the contemporary understanding of sexual inversion.

Therefore, the case against Elisa and Marcela involved identity "fraud," understood in legal terms to be a violation of social norms, without attributing any particular pathology to the subjects involved. This contrasts with the case of the Hungarian Sandor/Savolta Vay (1889), the first recorded court case involving an accusation of sexual inversion (Mak, 2004). Nevertheless, some press articles written by specialists of the time did draw upon this diagnostic category (De Gabriel, 2008), three of which we examine here.

The first of these, published in June 1901 by an anonymous medical doctor, provided a diagnosis based exclusively on information extracted from press reports, and recommended that both women be confined to a mental asylum. In this sense, social fraud was transformed into pathology, going beyond a simple violation of community norms to an expression of sick minds, whose psychological and somatic sex failed to match up. Therapeutic confinement was seen as necessary to avoid an outbreak of "sexual inversion" – which the author, like other anthropologists and psychiatrists of the time, considered to be contagious.

The second article, published in August 1901, was written by another doctor, Daniel Bascuñana Charfolé. This article, written from an anthropological

perspective, makes no reference to sexual inversion, instead drawing upon the Lombrosian notion of atavism. Bascuñana blamed society, whose anti-physiological "conventionalisms" require women to maintain their virginity, for the "unbalanced sensuality" demonstrated by the two women. In the absence of any anatomical deformity that could cause Elisa's "manly instincts," his explanation was that circumstances combined with this virginity imperative to transform the women's friendship into "sapphistic fervor." He argued that any satisfaction of this nature would be partial, being limited to superficial genital stimulation. This kind of argument could also be seen in the popular understanding of "hysteria" and its supposed cure by marriage, which also explains the frequent media references to Elisa and Marcela as "hysterics." Bascuñana departed from the usual medical canon that assumed women to be sexually anesthetized beings. He saw both Marcela and Elisa as victims of social norms that went against nature, and understood their fraudulent marriage as an understandable attempt to legitimate their situation and avoid public scandal.

The third article, "Marriages between women," was written in August 1904 by José María Llanas Aguilaniedo, a pharmacist turned criminological anthropologist. His primary focus was on the famous 16th-century case of Elena de Céspedes, which he used to establish a parallel with the marriage of Elisa and Marcela. Applying anthropological categories taken from Lombroso, he begins by diagnosing Elena de Céspedes with "sexual inversion." He describes her as a mixed-race child of a slave, unstable in character and nomadic of lifestyle, adding that Céspedes was an evolutionary throwback whose "primitivism" exceeded what might be attributable to a female temperament. Her marriage to a woman, the clearest symptom of her sexual inversion, served to relate her case to that of Elisa/Mario. Both belong to the same strain of unusually talented "inverts." One of the most original contributions of this criminologist was his tolerance for the marriage of "homosexual couples." He believed that by channeling their pathological instincts through the institution of marriage, these "inverts" could be converted into productive citizens.

## Continuity: Marcela, Elisa and "lesbian like" practices

Geertje Mak's analysis of the multiple logics of sexual identity provides us with guidance for marking the distance between the Galician's women's context and our own. Their world would have seemed completely foreign to us, without any of the distinctions between sex, gender, and sexuality that seem evident today. These women have been presented as pioneers of the Spanish lesbian movement and precursors of the same-sex marriage now legal in Spain. This narrative may well serve a valuable political purpose. Nevertheless, from a historical point of view, such interpretations are anachronistic and take liberties with the very concept of identity. As we have seen, neither the women's cohabitation and eventual marriage nor Elisa's aversion to men and adoption of a masculine appearance were interpreted at the time as expressions of a lesbian identity. It would also be

inappropriate to understand Marcela's erotic alternation as the manifestation of latent bisexuality. Lesbian and bisexual subjectivities were never invoked in what very little evidence we have of the women's self understandings, or in the relatively abundant testimonies of others concerning their behaviors. Along with notions of sexual identity as assigned social role and physical reality, we do see some evidence that sex was understood as an interior psychological state, but only in terms of the "sexual invert."[8]

Nevertheless, our emphasis here on difference cannot completely erase the family resemblance between the behaviors of Elisa and Marcela and those of individuals who nowadays do identify as lesbians. It is precisely this continuity that makes it possible to resurrect these two protagonists, making them into heroines that predate lesbian emancipation. In order to capture this continuity, we draw upon the concept of "lesbian like," coined by medievalist Judith Bennett (2000). This category involves some important compromises.

In the first place, as Bennett (2000: 14) points out, "lesbian like" is not an identity category, but one of similarity. The goal is to respect the particularity of love between women in past ages, while at the same time recognizing its continuity with the present. In this way uncertainty and instability can be maintained without reifying entities like a panhistoric "lesbian personality."

Secondly, the concept refers to practices instead of subjectivities, acts rather than experiences. This understanding from an external perspective makes "lesbian like" an ideal tool for exploring contexts for which we do not have access to evidence (diaries, memoirs, private correspondence, autobiographies, etc.) of the self perceptions of the women involved, as is the case with the medieval period studied by Bennett. In this sense the concept is also applicable to the case of Elisa and Marcela, since we lack sources that provide insight into their emotional and sexual motivations and self understandings. However, we do know about a portion of their life history, their demonstrations of affection, their mutual support, and their determination to remain together and to overcome the many obstacles they encountered.

Finally, this category involves not only sexual practices among women, in terms of homoerotic relations, but also the full repertoire of practices related to "homosociality" and the reversal of roles and occupations.[9] This can be seen in two of Bennett's (2000: 17–20) examples. One of these refers to an aristocratic widow of Ferrara in the early Middle Ages, who refused to remarry and instead established a convent. The founder made every attempt to keep the institution out of the hands of the (male) ecclesiastical authorities and under exclusively female management. Another example of "lesbian like" that involved a role reversal lacking in sexual dimension was that of a young woman who passed as a man for several years in order to study medicine at the University of Krakow in early medieval Poland.

Analyzing the actions of Marcela and Elisa as "lesbian like" permits us to avoid interpreting their story as a freak occurrence: this story was by no means a drop of lesbianism in a sea of heteronomativity. Instead, it reveals the unstable and precarious nature of a heteronormative system marked by sexual binaries. The couple's practices invoke a "lesbian like" culture of (single, middle-class)

female teachers, relatively independent of family control and the marriage market, that coexisted with other ‘‘lesbian like’’ spaces in Spanish popular culture at the end of the 19th century: prostitutes (Bernaldo de Quirós and Llanas Aguilaniedo, 1997), prisoners (Salillas, 1888), and the famously independent Spanish cigarette factory workers known as *cigarreras* (Bernaldo de Quirós and Llanas Aguilaniedo, 1997). The shared socialization of female teachers in Normal Schools, which were segregated until 1931, provided them with the ‘‘lesbian like’’ environment characteristic of other ‘‘total institutions’’ like boarding schools and convents (Goffman, 1961). These were female homosocial cultures, often connected by experts (and in the popular consciousness) with homoerotic sexual practices.

While it is clear that Marcela and Elisa acted ‘‘lesbian like’’ when they carried out various strategies to cultivate and prolong their loving relationship, they never adopted what we would recognize today as a ‘‘lesbian identity.’’ Their self-fashioning[10] project never led to the self discovery of a latent, pre-existing identity, but it did challenge the identities available to them at the time. They adopted a wide variety of modalities: hermaphrodite (Elisa), male (Elisa), unbaptized Protestant (Elisa), women financially supporting a household (Marcela), defender of honor (Elisa), recognized community authority (Marcela), manager of the couple’s social capital in the community (Marcela), servant (Elisa and Marcela), teacher (Elisa and Marcela), Galician emigrant (Elisa and Marcela), husband (Elisa), and wife (Marcela).

Elisa also rekindled a tradition of cross dressing in the spirit of Catalina de Erauso and Elena de Céspedes whom, as we have seen, managed to achieve a ‘‘sexual promotion’’ and, in some cases, were even praised for their courage and intelligence (Vicinus, 2004: xxiii). However, by the early 20th century, the scientific community increasingly supported the binary model of two incommensurate and complementary sexes, so that these behaviors were more and more stigmatized and pathologized.

Nevertheless, Elisa and Marcela’s self-fashioning project was facilitated by the particular time and place: early 20th-century Galicia was still relatively free of colonization by the pathologizing identity categories of the experts (Vicinus, 2004: 202–228). Furthermore, the sexological, psychiatric, and criminological construction of female homosexuality lagged considerably behind that of its male counterpart (Tamagne, 2000: 235–236). Indeed, scandals like the one raised by the ‘‘marriage without a man’’ helped to spread these categories and bring them, by means of the press, into the realm of public opinion (Tamagne, 2000: 239–240).

## Final reflections

Drawing on Foucault’s technique of genealogical analysis, Matusov and Smith (2012) have argued that the notion of identity itself, as the product of personal choice from among available enduring categories resulting in a finalized self, is an ontological category that emerged among the North American new middle class after the Second World War. The protagonists whose story we (re)analyze here explained and justified their actions and desires using the ontological constructs available at the time: first a cross-dressing strategy that sought to emulate a

heteronormative relationship that would be recognizable and acceptable within the existing patriarchy, and then a claim of hermaphrodism that drew upon what was then considered to be scientific understandings of human sex and sexuality. It is difficult to unpick the degree to which these arguments can be seen as purely strategic (faking man), and to what extent they represent the ways in which those involved sought to explain their undefined and therefore indefinable desires and behaviors not only to the public authorities, but also to themselves. But certainly the historical reality was more complex than the star-crossed (lesbian) lovers narrative offered by the modern press.

In this sense, a queer restorying of the events allows us to (temporarily) suspend comprehension rather than succumb to the temptation of recuperating the unknowable into our own familiar categories. Drawing upon the analytical category of "lesbian like" then allows us to interpret the narrative as both continuous and discontinuous with respect to our own time and space. With this more complete picture in mind, we can still recognize and celebrate the tenacity and creativity of these two women. Elisa and Marcela managed to reinvent themselves in a universe determined to govern their behavior according to norms that did not fit their desires. Through their capacity to draw upon multiple frames of sexual identity, they developed their own strategies in a world quite unlike our own, where sex, gender, and sexuality constituted parts of an undifferentiated whole. Theirs was a strikingly different playing field, but not so much as to prevent us from glimpsing the emerging shape of heroes and struggles that we must follow into the future.

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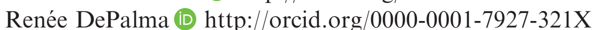
Renée DePalma  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7927-321X

## Notes

1. We have chosen to cite source documents (newspaper articles and archives) via this secondary source, in order to simplify referencing. We will occasionally note specific pages in this text where source documents are cited.
2. Later in this interview, Foucault specifically addresses women's relationships, referring specifically to a then recently published study (Faderman, 1980, cited in Foucault, 1981), whose author asserted that what most interested her were the specific characteristics of each relationship studied, rather than whether or not they could technically be defined as homosexual.
3. Galicia is an autonomous community situated in the northeast of Spain, bordering on Portugal. It has an indigenous language that shares a common origin with Portuguese. At the time of the events analyzed here, the regional economy consisted primarily of family-based agriculture and farming, although some fledgling industrial initiatives were starting to emerge. In 1900 the population was mainly rural, with just under 2 million inhabitants, mainly women (122 for each 100 men, higher than the overall Spanish ratio of 105:100). This feminization of the region resulted from male-dominated processes of emigration, especially to Argentina. The city of Buenos Aires, in fact, serves an important role in the story of Elisa and Marcela.

4. We refer to Mario using a masculine pronoun. Despite the fact that this is not a lasting persona, we have decided to use modern protocol that privileges the professed gender of the individual.
5. Elisa took the name María, while Marcela was known as Carmen.
6. Strangely, the two broad reviews of the history of female homoeroticism written by Spanish authors make hardly any reference to the Spanish case (see Gimeno, 2005; Sanfeliú, 1996).
7. The newspaper article referred to here is from *Le Courrier de la Plata*, and was discovered by the Argentinian historian Hernán Díaz.
8. For a characterization of the differences between the categories of "inversion" and "lesbianism" (and "homosexuality"), see Chauncey (1989: 87–117), Halperin (2002: 131–132), and Mak (2004: 70–71).
9. For the difference between homosexuality, effeminacy, sodomy, friendship (or homosociality) and inversion, see Halperin (2002: 135).
10. We derive this concept from the writings of Martha Vicinus (2004, 2012), although the term was first introduced by Stephen Greenblatt (1980) to describe the construction of subjectivities, including gender, in English Renaissance culture.

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