



"I am and have been a hermaphrodite": Elena/Eleno de Céspedes and the Spanish Inquisition

The Spanish Inquisition [may be a cliché](#), but while I have my doubts about hermaphrodites [being persecuted in the Middle Ages](#), there can be no doubt that there are indeed several cases of 'hermaphrodites' being interrogated by the Spanish Inquisition in the 16th and 17th centuries. Cleminson and Vázquez García in their recent book on *Hermaphrodites in Iberia* (see [here for a review \[in German\]](#)) quote from the records of several trials, and [Enrique](#) has found additional material in the digitized archival materials. So there is a lot of research going on, and many new findings to look forward to.

Today, however, I would like to return to what is probably the most famous hermaphrodite that ever faced the Spanish Inquisition, namely Elena *aka* Eleno de Céspedes, arrested, interrogated and sentenced in 1587. The first modern article on his/her fate I know of appeared in 1984 (Barbazza 1984), and the Bulloughs mention the case in passing (Bullough/Bullough 1993, 95), but it was only [Israel Burshatin](#) who made Elena/Eleno de Céspedes widely known to a scholarly audience (Burshatin 1996, 1998, 1999); since the turn of the millenium, few publications on hermaphrodites in early modern times have failed to mention the records which now are even available in an English translation (Kagan / Dyer 2004, 36-59; all quotations in the following are taken from this translation).

The biography of Elena/Eleno is a long series of status changes. Elena was born and raised as a slave girl, but was freed at young age. At the age of fifteen, she married and gave birth to a son, but after her husband abandoned her, she lived on her own as a hoisier and tailor. After she had stabbed a pimp called Heredia, she fled 'because of the threat this Heredia and his other pimp friends made against me' (Kagan / Dyer 2004, 40) in male garb. In her later account, Elena/Eleno twice mentioned not using any (gendered) given name at the time, only 'Céspedes', to have been arrested because a corregidor 'suspecting I was a woman' (ibid., 41), and to have clad in women's clothes at least once. Having served as a soldier for some time, Eleno became a tailor and entered a (male) guild, 'but they made me put "seamstress" on the sign since they knew I was a woman' (ibid., 41). This period of ambiguity ended when Eleno again fought as a soldier for three years, and afterwards practiced his trade as a tailor in several places before making friends with a surgeon and learning this craft too; indeed he worked as a surgeon in the Hospital de la Corte (ibid., 42). At the age of around 40, Eleno (now living in Madrid) married a second time, and at this occassion (apparently the first time for a long period), his male status was called into question. There were rumours 'that I was male and female' (ibid., 44), and the local vicar suspected Eleno of being a *capon* (ibid., 43). Three times, the authorities in Madrid and Toledo had Eleno inspected, and all witnesses (including physicians and surgeons) confirmed that he was a man (ibid., 44-45). So the marriage took place, but rumours continued, and Eleno was accused of sodomy by some neighbours.

The case was first heard by the secular court, where Eleno was accused of 'sodomy with women while pretending to be a man' and 'contempt for the sacrament of marriage'. He pleaded not guilty because he was a male (ibid., 46). In 1587, the case passed to the Inquisition where Eleno/Elena argued somewhat differently: in his/her defence s_he asserted to be a hermaphrodite; s_he admitted to have slept with her husband when married as a woman, and with many women when living as a man, but insisted on never having committed sodomy as s_he only had sex with partners of the opposite sex. One of the many questions s_he was asked concerned the bodily inspections:



“Asked how she, being a woman, could make physicians and witnesses think she was a man, even if she made herself wrinkled and narrow with the remedies and potions she prepared, she said, "In reality I am and was a hermaphrodite. I have and had two natures, one of a man and the other of a woman. What happened is that when I gave birth, I did so with such force in my [woman's] part, that a piece of skin broke out above my urethra and a head emerged about half the size of a thumb, like so, which resembled the swollen head of a male member, which, when I had natural passion and desire, came out, as I said. When I felt desire it got bigger. I gathered the member up and put it back in the place where it had come from so that the skin wouldn't break.”

According to her 1587 account, Elena/Eleno ever since lived as a hermaphrodite, and more specifically, as a 'predominantly male hermaphrodite' for most of the time. In a letter to the Inquisition written during the trial, Elena/Eleno elaborated the same issue:

“I have never pretended to be a man in order to marry a woman as some have impugned. What has happened is that in this world we have often heard of people who are androgynous, or who, by another name, are also called hermaphrodites, who have two sexes. I am and have been a hermaphrodite, and at the time I married [i.e. the first time, CR] the masculine sex prevailed in me. I was naturally a man and had all the necessary parts of a man in order to marry, as had been proven through examinations by doctors and surgeons licensed in their arts, who saw and touched me and swore legal oaths that I could marry as a man.”

In the manuscript, an unknown member of the inquisition scribbled in the margin: "Pliny, Cicero, Augustine", and while I am not sure about Cicero (who mentioned hermaphrodites as prodigies in *De divinatione*. 1.98, but not sex changes), Elena/Eleno indeed is alluding to *Pliny's Natural history* here, and also to *St Augustine's rather relaxed attitude* towards the so-called *monstrous races*. Elena's reference to her 'prevailing sex' is an allusion to the *standard formula used in Roman* and canon law - he_she evidently was familiar with medical, literary, philosophical and legal traditions. An inventory of her books lists works of Aristotle, Cicero, Galen and Vesalius (Barbazza 1984, 32).

According to the same letter, Eleno when first desiring a woman, a certain Ana, went to see a doctor:

“With a probe he put inside me, he made a cut above the piece of skin which had begun to come out. With this cut there emerged a male member, which was as large as a [illeg.] and as long as this line:

It came out bent in an arch, so the surgeon cut it a little bit. With that the member straightened out.”

Anyone who thinks that size matters, would need to see the original manuscript. In any case, Eleno now lived as a man and had sexual encounters with women ('many other women', as she_he confirmed in 1587). The 'emergence' of a penis may puzzle the modern reader, and may well have been regarded as *mirabilis* in 16th c. Spain (see Daston/Park 1998 on such 'wonders'), but it was in tune with medical knowledge and also other narrative accounts of women-turned-men (Diodor of Sicily [[English translation](#)], the 14th c. *Annales Colmariensis* [[English translation](#)], *Straparola* [[English translation](#)]).



So the Inquisition had accused Elena of 'sodomy while pretending to be a man', while Eleno insisted to have been a predominantly male hermaphrodite when marrying his wife. Yet the story took another turn when the Inquisition demanded another inspection. Elena/Eleno now said to have *lost* the penis which in his/her account played such a crucial role to claim male status (Kagan / Dyer 2004, 49):

“At present I have only my woman's nature. The male member that emerged from me has just recently come off in jail, while I was a prisoner in Ocafia. It only now finished falling off, after more than fifteen days. What happened is that before last Christmas I suffered a flow of blood through my woman's parts and through my rear end, which caused me great pain in my kidneys. I'd hurt myself while riding horseback and the root of my member became weak. The member became spongy and I went cutting it bit by bit, so that I've come to be without it. It just finished falling off about fifteen days ago, or a little more, as I've said.”

The Inquisition also asked about Eleno's testicles, to which she answered somewhat enigmatically (ibid., 49):

“Asked what kinds of testicles she had, since the witnesses and physicians who examined her said that she had a male member and testicles like a man, she responded, "I have them in a particular form." She described them with her hands but was not able to be understood. She said that if she were to describe the form to a physician, he would understand her, and would see in what form and way she has them.”

At this point for the very latest, Eleno's account becomes utterly difficult to believe, even for a sixteenth-century audience prepared to believe in 'wonders of nature'; and Eleno was not talking to a well-meaning audience ready to read some 'entertaining stories' the miracles of nature (as Straparola's readers), or scholars eager to learn more about the complexities of human anatomy. No, he/she related all this answering the questions of inquisitors who thought him/her to be a woman, and did so in an almost arrogant fashion (e.g. claiming that only a 'physician would understand her', ibid., 49).

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Eleno/Elena in the end was sentenced, but both the sentence and the punishment deserve closer attention. Elena (as the inquisitors continued to call him/her) was found guilty of sorcery and disrespect for the marriage sacrament, but *not* sodomy; the sentence was 'two hundred lashes, public shaming, appearance at an auto de fe, and to serve the poor as a surgeon in a charity hospital for ten years, without pay' (ibid., 53; Barbazza 1984, 38). This was a cruel punishment, but the charge of sodomy - and hence the very serious risk of being burnt at the stake - was dropped. Also, somewhat paradoxically, the court seems to assert that Elena/Eleno was a woman, and hence had to wear female garb, but at the same time made her work as a surgeon - definitely a male profession at the time. It may not have been the intention of the Inquisition, but by this sentence, Madrid had its first female surgeon in history, and maybe the only one well into modern times.

On a more serious note, these points make me doubt that the sentence is a good example of the Inquisition and an 'all-powerful state' imposing 'social control' (Barbazza 1984, 39-40); for me, the most impressive aspect of Elena/Eleno's trial is how very successfully s_he managed to control the narrative of the trial. At the same time, this in my view clearly demonstrates that Elena/Eleno was not 'accused' of hermaphroditism (as claimed by Cleminson/Vázquez García 2013). Rather, hermaphroditism in sixteenth-century Spain (as [in medieval France](#), for that



matter) was a defence strategy. Eleno/Elena's story of first gradually changing from woman to man and later from predominantly male to predominantly female hermaphrodite may be mind-boggling, but given the very real danger of being condemned for sodomy, the story in the end was live-saving.

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