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Mario/Elisa and Marcela: Scandal and Surprise in the 1901 Spanish Press

Joyce Tolliver and Sean McDaniel

In the summer of 1901, many Spaniards were surprised to read detailed newspaper reports about the legal Church wedding between two women in Galicia. Even now, we are surprised to hear of this nearly 120-year old case, and many marvel at how it foreshadows many important social changes of our own era. The ceremony that consecrated the marriage took place in La Coruña on June 22, 1901, when a priest blessed the union of Mario Sánchez Loriga and Marcela Gracia Ibeas. It was soon discovered that Mario had been born, and had lived almost all his life, as a woman named Elisa Sánchez Loriga, and that Elisa and Marcela, who were both schoolteachers, had lived together in an apparently intimate relationship for years.

When the ruse of the couple's wedding was discovered, there was an explosion of reaction all across the Spanish nation, which was both fueled by and reflected in the coverage of the story in the Galician press. The public's fascination with what the newspaper *La Voz de Galicia* called the "asunto ruidoso" ("scandalous affair") later became the subject of both concern and ridicule on the part of essayists writing for the supposedly "serious" press outside of Galicia. The couple had a local photographer take a wedding photo, and this visual documentation of the event became one of the most widely circulated photographs in Spain's history.¹

Narciso de Gabriel's 2008 Galician-language volume *Elisa e Marcela: Alén dos homes* includes a wealth of archival material, which de Gabriel uses to reconstruct the narrative of the "matrimonio sin hombre" case. De Gabriel later translated the volume to Castilian, and has recently re-issued it, with additional material, under the title, *Elisa y Marcela: Amigas y amantes*. De Gabriel's reconstruction of the events of that narrative is certainly compelling.² In our analysis, however, we shift our attention away from the putative details of the couples' personal relationship, and toward the significance of the reporting on the event for the study of representations of passing in Spanish texts.³

¹ Narciso de Gabriel, *Más allá de los hombres*, intro. by Manuel Rivas, (Barcelona, Libros del Silencio, 2010), 179.

² Drawing on his meticulous archival research, de Gabriel traces the history of the couple from the time of the first press coverages of the wedding up until the moment when the archival traces of the narrative trail fade away, in Buenos Aires, after the couple's well-documented flight to Portugal. In this study, our focus is on the coverage given in the Spanish press in the days and weeks following the event.

³ In part because of its associations with U.S. post-Reconstruction racial dynamics, the term "passing," to refer to the phenomenon as well as to individual acts, can be translated only roughly

We take as our premise that, over time, there are changes in the relative regulatory strength of the categories of identity that structure social privileges and roles, and that there are also changes throughout history in the determination of which identity categories significantly structure privilege. In general, the ways in which literary and popular texts reflect negotiations about membership in these categories reflect these shifts in how identity categories regulate privilege. In particular, narratives of passing provide access to the details of the struggles over identity categories, because they document the ways in which the boundaries of these categories are policed, and how the validity of the regulatory functions of the categories is called into question.

While the word “passing” is most commonly associated in the United States with narratives involving racial identity in the post-Reconstruction period, and the high stakes of claiming membership in the category of “white,” narratives about individuals who present themselves as members of identity categories to which they have no “right” to membership are obviously not limited to this situation. The prototypical passing act represented in Early Modern Spanish texts was that of the *converso* who self-presented as a *cristiano viejo*; and stories about class passing appear at multiple points of history and in various cultural contexts, as do narratives of gender passing.⁴ Narratives of passing show us those crucial points in history when the strength of identity categories is questioned, and they therefore throw into relief the mutability of the categories themselves. In a more expansive work, we plan to analyze how various categories of passing have been represented from the Early Modern to the modern periods, in an effort to contribute to an understanding of shifts in social structures of privilege in Spain. In this article, we focus on just one passing narrative that illustrates a moment in Spain's history when the regulatory strength of the category of sex was openly called into question.

Our overarching aims are similar to those suggested in Pol Dalmau's analysis of *La Vanguardia's* coverage of a slightly later scandal, the 1906 resignation of the newspaper's director over allegations of corruption. In

to Spanish. The journal *Alrededor del Mundo* uses the verbal construction “pasar por” in the 1901 article we discuss here, and we have seen uses of “hacerse pasar por,” but always in reference to individual boundary transgressions. The difficulty of translating the noun “passing” to Spanish suggests a relative lack of theorization of passing as a cultural phenomenon across different identity categories in Spanish-language contexts. There is no translation for “passing” that adequately communicates the full semantic charge of the term; none that distinguishes it from disguise or conveys the implications for the identity of the passer or for the category passed.

⁴ Much has been written about the representations of passing in Early Modern Spain. See, for example, Barbara Fuchs, *Passing for Spain: Cervantes and the Fictions of Identity* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), Javier Irigoyen, *'Moors Dressed as Moors': Clothing, Social Distinction, and Ethnicity in Early Modern Iberia* (University of Toronto Press, 2017), or Sherry Velasco, *The Lieutenant Nun: Transgenderism, Lesbian Desire, and Catalina de Erauso* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

examining *La Vanguardia's* coverage, Dalmau also helps to pinpoint a shift in moral values in Spain, which ultimately sheds light on “la génesis de los valores contemporáneos” (“the origin of contemporary values”).⁵ In like fashion, we find the “matrimonio sin hombre” case to be a particularly rich source of information about the relative power of certain identity categories to regulate social privilege at given moments in history, including our own.

At the time it occurred, the event engaged such a broad cross-section of the Spanish public that its developing narrative—and, more importantly, *fin de siglo* understandings of that narrative’s social and cultural significance—were meticulously documented and analyzed. What that documentation reveals is the public’s acute awareness of the social consequences entailed by an individual’s membership in one of the identity categories that structure social privileges, rights, and responsibilities. The copious representations of the event in the Spanish press in the days and weeks following the wedding provide a window into an historical moment when we find open questioning of sex and gender as fixed and inherent principles of social organization. The commentary that the event elicited in 1901 centered around the breach of the boundaries that marked off the parameters of the rights and privileges that were granted to those belonging to the socially constructed category of male.

In the theoretical framework we use to examine representations of passing, we use the term “domain” to refer to the set of privileges and responsibilities associated with a relevant social category (e.g. white, male, of noble lineage, Catholic, etc.). According to our understanding of passing, individuals exercise the rights and privileges of their domains by enacting culturally legible scripts associated with those domains.

Our metaphor of the script, particularly as it refers to gender and sex, draws on Judith Butler’s groundbreaking analysis of the dynamics of performativity, through which the myriad subtle manifestations of individuals’ membership in a given category are expressed and understood.⁶ Butler’s readings of drag and of passing have made fundamental contributions to our understanding of gender and subjectivity. In obvious ways, our analysis is influenced by her notion of performativity, in which she extrapolates the concept of performative speech acts from the individual conversational speech act to a much broader notion of self-presentation. Of particular interest to us is Butler’s argument that “bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of

⁵ Pol Dalmau, “La reputación del noble. Escándalos y capital simbólico en la España liberal,” *Historia y política* 39, (enero-junio 2018): 103.

⁶ See, in particular, Judith Butler, “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge,” *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 167-86.

certain highly gendered regulatory schemas.”⁷ We see fruitful points of intersection between her notion of “regulatory schemas” and the earlier notion of scripts Roger Schank and Robert Abelson developed within the context of theories of natural and artificial intelligence. For us, the key insight of Schank’s and Abelson’s script theory is that scripts provide predictability, which in turn helps us to imbue events with social and cultural meaning. As Schank and Abelson explain, when we enter a restaurant, for example, we expect to enact a certain “script,” based on our experiences with restaurants: we will be seated, handed a menu, expected to pay at the end of the meal, etc.⁸ Because we are familiar with the standard elements of the restaurant script, we expect the waiters and other employees to say and do certain things, and we play our own parts as well. When some aspect of the script is violated, we are surprised. It is the violation of the script that makes us aware of its existence.

We suggest that the commonly held knowledge of the details of a script’s predictable, unalterable elements is crucial to the mechanism of passing. When an element of the script is imperfectly enacted, an individual’s inhabitation of a given domain may be questioned. The importance of the deviation from the script lies not only in the consequences for the individual, but in the stability of the domain itself, whose particular privileges are enacted in the script. Likewise, the perceived naturalness and inevitability of a given category are threatened when an individual who cannot “legitimately” claim membership in a given category nevertheless manages to enact the script accurately and convincingly. In these cases—that is, in cases of passing—the essential artificiality of the category itself is revealed, and the scaffolding of the structures of social hierarchies is laid bare.

Schank’s and Abelson’s emphasis on the predictability of scripts suggests the need to consider more fully the significance of representations of the public’s response to how given scripts are performed. These responses record how observers interpret the semiotics of script performances, and how they judge the relative degree of “realness” in those performances.⁹ In this sense, we further the analysis of representations of passing offered by Amy Robinson, which marks a departure from other passing theories that consider primarily the questionable ontological status of the identity category that the passer appropriates. Instead, Robinson examines the phenomenology of the pass— how a pass is identified as

⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xi.

⁸ Roger Schank and Robert Abelson, “Scripts,” *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (Hinsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1977), 36-68.

⁹ J. Halberstam discusses the notions of “realness” and the “real” in similar terms. For Halberstam, realness “...is not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, *appropriate the real* and its effects” (Judith [Jake] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York: New York University Press, 2005, 51); our emphasis.

a pass.¹⁰ Our study maintains this focus on the phenomenology of passing, as opposed to its ontological status. However, in contrast to Robinson's analysis, we shift our focus away from the individual passing act, and turn our attention instead to what the *response* to the revealed pass can tell us about the status of the categories whose boundaries are transgressed by the act of passing.

The act of passing illuminates the details of the script, because passing relies on an enactment of the “wrong” script—that is, the enactment of a script that manifests a domain to which the individual cannot legitimately lay claim. In that sense, acts of passing are always of cultural significance. But we find textual representations of passing acts to be of even greater, historical significance, because the reception and subsequent representation of an act of passing allows us to understand the relative potency of the identity category being violated—that is, following Raymond Williams, its status as a dominant, residual, or emerging category.¹¹ In what follows, we draw on Williams's insights to analyze the responses to the “matrimonio sin hombre” case for what they can tell us about the shifting status of sex as a regulatory category in 1901.

Given our focus on the status of the category itself, in this study we do not significantly engage questions involving the relationship between the couple, or the transgender status of Mario/Elisa. In this respect, we simply note that, if Mario/Elisa was a transgender person—or a “hermaphrodite,” which was the term used by Mario himself—then the true passing act, from Mario's perspective, would lie in Mario/Elisa's consistent self-presentation as a cisgender woman.¹² We make no claims about whether Elisa was actually passing as a man, or whether the self-presentation of Elisa as Mario represented a disguise that Elisa donned so that she could marry her lover Marcela. Rather, what anchors our study is that the event of the “matrimonio sin hombre” was in fact interpreted by the 1901 Spanish press to revolve around an act of passing that fascinated some, enraged others, and surprised everyone because it was, for a brief time, successful. We want to emphasize, then, that our interest lies in those 1901

¹⁰ Robinson posits a triangular model for the semiotics of the pass, in which the essential players are: the one who attempts a pass, the members of the group which the passer attempts to enter, and, crucially, the “in-group clairvoyant,” who identifies the performance as an attempted pass (Amy Robinson, “It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, summer 1994: 715-36). Most contemporary critical analyses of passing draw on early ontologically based analyses. Among others, see: Elaine Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Valerie Smith, “Class and Gender in Narratives of Passing,” *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elizabeth Bronfen and Kavka Misha (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 189-210; María C. Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg, eds., *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-123.

¹² “Un matrimonio sin hombre,” *Voz de Galicia*, 29 June 1901: 1.

reactions, rather than in any reconstruction of the event we might create for ourselves.

The first few days of the press coverage of the “matrimonio sin hombre” documented the reading public's striking shift of interest from the juicy details of the couple's personal life, to the larger social questions that the case raised—in other words, how the press coverage documented and responded to readers' attention to the blurring of the boundaries that demarcate the domains of gender. It was the La Coruña newspaper, *La Voz de Galicia*, that covered the case most extensively at first, but it soon made the national news and remained there throughout several weeks. By tracking the shifts in the themes and styles of the press's coverage of the event, we can also trace a second narrative: the story of the public's reactions to the events. That second narrative suggests that, in 1901 provincial Spain, the identification of nature-given gendered social rights with biological sex was actively interrogated; and, even more significantly, that even biological sex as a principle of social structure was open to question.

On the first day of their coverage (June 23, 1901), the editors begin by commenting that they originally decided not to cover the story because of what they called “the lack of solid proof”—and also because doing so might invite a lawsuit. The editors associate journalistic integrity with legal considerations, an association that is later emphasized when the editors refer explicitly to the courts of law. For them, both journalistic integrity and legal practices must reflect the moral values of the community: “Impone. . . la discreción más elemental una parquedad muy cuidadosa; pese a la veracidad de los informes, el suceso sigue siendo muy delicado. Es de los que se ven en la Audiencia a puertas cerradas.”¹³

But it turns out that the ethical and legal qualms the editors might have had were overridden by a stronger journalistic imperative: to feed the reading public's desire for a good story. They launch into the story, and as they do so, they rely heavily on the techniques of realist literature: narrative focalization, narratorial interventions, and direct quotes from the main characters, which clearly have been invented. Without citing any sources, for example, they “reproduce” Marcela's conversation with her mother the day she meets Elisa at the Teachers' School they both attend: “¡Ay, Mamá! dijo poco más o menos; —¡si vieses qué amiga más simpática y más buena tengo! Estoy encantada...—”¹⁴

The rest of the first day's coverage in *La Voz de Galicia* provides a wealth of detail as the editors tell the story of the troubled parents who try, and fail, to keep their innocent daughter away from the bad influence of a wild friend with a

¹³ “Basic standards of discretion require us to say as little as possible; even if the reports are true, the matter is nevertheless most delicate. The case is of the sort that is considered by judges behind closed doors” (*La Voz de Galicia*, 22 junio, 1901: 1).

¹⁴ “¡Ay, Mamá!,’ she said, or words to that effect, ‘you can't imagine what a pleasant, good-hearted friend I have! I am delighted...’” (*La Voz de Galicia* 22 junio, 1901: 1.)

terrible upbringing. The editors of *La Voz de Galicia* thus initially choose to understand the significance of the “matrimonio sin hombre” event as the culmination of a narrative whose plot revolves around the dangers of careless parenting and unconventional family structures. They insinuate that Elisa’s mother was not married to her father when Elisa was born: “La madre de esta joven se llamaba doña María Loriga Landeira, esposa o viuda entonces de don Manuel Sánchez. Parece, sin embargo, que el verdadero papá de la joven Elisa es el ya fallecido profesor de inglés, don Juan Dodds.”¹⁵ Likewise, Marcela’s dangerous infatuation with her “amigueta” is insufficiently policed by her own mother: “Nada queremos poner en duda ni hemos de reprochar tampoco su pasividad, que dio margen a que ocurriese lo que hoy es objeto de todas las conversaciones. Ella pudo impedirlo perfectamente. Su ausencia, su silencio, dieron facilidades para el mal. Es hoy tan profundo el dolor de la pobre madre, que no es oportuno, sin embargo, turbarlo con recriminaciones.”¹⁶

In narrating this story of failed families, the editors adopt the conventions of the didactic *folletín*, dividing the long article into small chapter-like sections, each with its own title: “Antecedentes—amistad perniciosa;” “A casarse tocan;” “Se descubre el pastel;” “¿El o ella?” (“Antecedents: Dangerous Friendship”; “Wedding Bells Ring,” “The Cat Is Out of the Bag,” “He or She?”), etc. The characters are one-dimensional: the “diabólica” Elisa and her morally suspect mother, destroyed by her own passivity; the ingenuous and weak Marcela and her well-meaning but ineffectual parents. The successful gender pass is a dramatic and extravagant detail in this narrative, showing the depths of Elisa’s depravity, but the pass itself is not the focus of the story. The moral lesson is obvious: mothers must protect the integrity of their families, and the chastity of their daughters, at all costs. The editors’ initial framing of the story as a novel about the breakdown of a working-class family is not trivial: in a culture whose practices rely so heavily on the institution of the family for the quotidian policing of moral values, any story about families gone wrong can be read as a sign of insecurity about the integrity of that institution.

Yet, according to *Voz de Galicia*’s coverage on the following day, the readers of this journalistic *folletín* rejected the role of passive consumers of a melodramatic tale about families. Instead, they responded with lively interest and a desire for more details: “El asunto fue objeto preferido de todas las

¹⁵ “The name of this young woman’s mother was doña María Loriga Landeira, the wife or widow of don Manuel Sánchez. However, it would appear that young Elisa’s real father is don Juan Dodds, an English professor who is now deceased” (*La Voz de Galicia* 22 junio, 1901: 1).

¹⁶ “We do not wish to call anything into question, nor are we to reproach her for her passivity, which opened the way for the event that is now the topic of everyone’s conversation. She was perfectly capable of stopping it. Her absence, her silence, opened the door for the damage to be done. Nevertheless, now the poor mother’s grief is so deep, that it would not be appropriate to sully it with recriminations” (*La Voz de Galicia* 22 junio, 1901: 2).

conversaciones. Puede decirse que no se habló de otra cosa, y no fue por cierto entre las mujeres donde menos comentarios, cálculos, suposiciones, y juicios se hicieron.”¹⁷ Apparently, questions that went beyond the narrative of Marcela's family, beyond the easy blaming and shaming of the women's mothers, to instead interrogate the meaning of the “asunto ruidoso” formed an important part of those “calculations, assumptions, and judgements.” Prompted by their readers, the editors abandon their initial presentation of the “broken families” narrative and instead shift their focus to the multiple questions raised by the successful gender pass that Elisa seems to have performed.

La Voz de Galicia responds to the questions the community itself is raising, which go far beyond a fascination with the stories of the women's families, and even beyond the individual narrative of Elisa and Marcela, to a more searching examination of the issues the story raises for the stability of social structures. The editors gesture toward potential responses to those questions, shifting their initial claim of epistemic authority based on access to intimate information about a troubled family, to a claim based instead on their access to the expert opinions of those who maintain the stability of social structures through the production of discourses of authority. In their responses to these questions, the editors invoke the medical and legal discourses that enforce heterosexual marriage as the foundation of Spanish culture. Rather than dismissing Elisa as a demonic deviant, the editors are now considering the significance of her particular type of supposed deviance.

Elisa's fleetingly successful attempt to pass as a man fascinates readers in 1901. At the core of this fascination lies their understanding of the nature of the categories of male and female themselves—and the enigma of how anyone could manage to escape the vigilance of the social discourses and institutions enforcing the stability of those categories. In this sense, it is not surprising that, on days three and four of the coverage (June 24 and 25, 1901) *La Voz de Galicia* explicitly situates the story within the contexts of two primary institutions of social surveillance—medicine and law.

On June 24, the first column of the front page is dedicated to an article titled, “Lo que dice un médico: Mario-Elisa ante la ciencia” (“What a physician says: Mario-Elisa and science”). The examination of the “matrimonio sin hombre” narrative within the context of the history of “science” and history elicits a broader historical context: the period's acute insecurity about the stability and definition of the Spanish nation. The editors explain:

¹⁷ “The case was the favorite topic of every conversation. One could say that was all that was talked about, and certainly women were not the ones least inclined to offer comments, calculations, conjectures, and judgements” (*La Voz de Galicia*, 23 June: 1).

Nos pareció que la Medicina no debió ser ajena al examen del caso a que se refiere nuestra información. ¡Cuáles serán los de la vida humana que no tengan algún aspecto estudiable por los médicos! A uno, muy ilustre, nos hemos acercado ayer, y de prisa, porque las nerviosas exigencias del repórter son siempre poco compatibles con la reposada meditación del científico, [y] tuvo la condescendencia amabilísima de facilitarnos las cuartillas que a continuación insertamos, así como el artículo de la revista *Alrededor del Mundo* al que se refieren.¹⁸

It is significant that the “illustrious” physician whose judgement is reproduced here remains anonymous; readers must trust the editors that the writer of the documents they reproduce embodies the authority carried by Science. The anonymous doctor suggests that the Dumbría case is not unique, claiming at the outset that forensic experts have analyzed similar cases, which fall into the category of “inversión del sentido genésico” (“sexual inversion”).¹⁹ He explains that this is a nervous disease, associated with epilepsy, that usually begins in childhood, but—lest readers deduce that such “inversions” are inevitable and thus blameless—he adds that “influye mucho también la educación y el ejemplo” (“education and example are also powerful influences”).²⁰ Even though the Dumbría case is explained medically, then, readers are given the opportunity to retain the moral framing that *La Voz de Galicia* previously invoked to present the story of Marcela's failed family. Marcela's and Elisa's mothers are not off the hook yet.

The doctor then goes on to refer to the latest advances in psychiatry, such as those of Charcot, Lombroso, and Magnau, which associate the pathology of the two women with “casos notabilísimos de estas aberraciones, tan conocidas en la antigua Grecia que dieron nombre a la Safo de Lesbos y a otras muchas Safos de nuestros días” (“very notable cases of these aberrations, which were so widely known in ancient Greece that they inspired the name of Sappho of Lesbos and many other Sapphos of our own times”).²¹ Citing the work of Zucarelli, who associated the “deviance” in question with a certain physiognomy, he examines the wedding portrait taken by Sellier and proclaims that Mario conforms

¹⁸ “It seemed to us that Medicine was likely not irrelevant to the consideration of the case to which our information refers. How many matters of human life are there that are not open to study by physicians? We approached a very illustrious physician yesterday, rather hurriedly, since the pressing demands of reporters are so rarely compatible with scientists’ calm reflexion. He very kindly provided us with the pages that we include here, as well as with the article from the journal *Alrededor del Mundo*, to which those pages refer (*La Voz de Galicia*, 24 junio, 1901: 1).

¹⁹ *La Voz de Galicia*, 24 junio, 1901: 1.

²⁰ *La Voz de Galicia*, 24 junio, 1901: 1.

²¹ *La Voz de Galicia*, 24 junio, 1901: 1.

completely to the description Zucarelli gives of “el tipo físico de estas sujetas” (“the physical type of these female subjects”). He concludes his medical diagnosis by specifying that the two women should be shut away in an insane asylum because their illness is contagious, by way of example—even though in Galicia, it is, fortunately, “rarísima.”²² The claim that in Galicia cases of sexual deviance are rarely found serves not only to reassure readers that the integrity of gender categories is quite safe, but also to insinuate that Elisa and Marcela are not worthy citizens of the Galician community.

It is significant that, when citing experts in the study of sexual deviance, the doctor cites several French and Italian specialists, but only one Spaniard: Timoteo Sánchez Freire. Sánchez Freire was the director of the insane asylum of Conxo in Santiago de Compostela, who in 1888 delivered an influential lecture on hypnosis as a cure for neurological illnesses.²³ While French and Italian physicians diagnose sexual pathology, the anonymous doctor implies, Spaniards cure it. Thus the defense of the validity of the category of normative heterosexuality is intertwined with a reassurance about the continued health, if not of Spain, at least of Galicia. We see a reinforcement of this nexus in the coverage of the case featured in other newspapers around Spain, in which journalists attempt to silence the questioning of the boundaries between sexual normalcy and sexual deviance—and between male and female.

The anonymous doctor who contributes his expertise to the *Voz de Galicia* contradicts his own show of erudition by offering the simplistic and unlikely hypothesis that what precipitated the story of the “matrimonio sin hombre” was an article published four months earlier in a Madrid newspaper, *Alrededor del Mundo*, describing cases of “mujeres que pasan por hombres” (“women who pass as men”). Elisa must have read this article, he surmises, and decided to imitate the historically documented cases described there. The doctor's mention of this article provides the editors with more material for their curious readers, and they reprint it in its entirety, under the heading “Lo que dice la ciencia” (“What Science Says”).

The editors thus expand the scope of the focus on the details of the “matrimonio sin hombre” event, and implicitly place Elisa's actions in the foreground of the story. The republication of this particular essay shifts the frame of the narrative from that of dysfunctional family to that of the ruse effected by the two women, encompassing the whole trajectory of Elisa's role in the

²² *La Voz de Galicia*, 24 junio, 1901: 1.

²³ It was certainly not the case that no Spanish study of sexual “deviance” existed in 1901. Among many other texts, the anonymous doctor might have mentioned Amancio Peratoner's widely-cited *Higiene y fisiología del amor en los dos sexos. . . hermafroditismo y hermafroditas en la especie humana* (Hygiene and the Physiology of Love in Both Sexes ... Hermaphroditism and Hermaphrodites in the Human Species) (Barcelona: Moderna Maravilla, 1880).

“matrimonio sin hombre” narrative, from her first visit to Father Cortiella to the moment she flees Dumbría in a stagecoach to escape a mob of village men. The figure of Elisa is thus reframed, from the villain in the story of the dysfunctional family to a case study in the wider phenomenon of gender passing.

The republication of *Alrededor del Mundo's* short essay on “mujeres que pasan por hombres” (“women who pass for men”) positions gender passing as an exotic phenomenon, at the same time that it places the “matrimonio sin hombre” within a wider historical context. The essay describes the well-known case of the Chevalier d'Eon, who was born male and wore women’s clothing to infiltrate the court of the Empress of Russia as a spy; as well as those of Queen Christina of Sweden, the French Romantic novelist George Sand, and the U. S. politician Murray Hall. It also describes a handful of cases of British “mujeres que pasan por hombres” (“women who pass for men”), including the military physician Dr. James Barry.

This group is strikingly heterogenous not only because of its international nature, but also because it represents such a broad spectrum of violations of the script governing self-presentation of gender. When the novelist Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin began to appear in public wearing men's clothing, and when she published her novels under a male pseudonym, she deceived only strangers; her friends and family knew that Aurore published her fiction under a male pseudonym, and that she dressed in men's clothing because it gave her the freedom to enter public spaces forbidden to respectable ladies. In contrast, Murray Hall seems to have consistently self-presented as male in his life as a politician, and the fact that he was born female was discovered only upon his death. To consider all of these cases equally as examples of passing stretches the definition of the term, and elides the varying severity of the consequences of discovery. What all these stories have in common, however, is the access afforded to biological females to privileges that only men usually enjoyed. On the other hand, glaringly absent is any mention of gender passing in Spain; not even the legendary Spanish Basque transgender soldier, Catalina de Erauso (“la Monja Alférez”) is mentioned. It would seem that both history and “science” agree that violations of gender normativity are foreign to Spanish culture.

The examination of the “matrimonio sin hombre” narrative within the contexts of “science” and history in this issue of the *Voz de Galicia* thus elicits another, broader context, which is the *fin de siglo's* general insecurity about the stability and even the definition of the Spanish nation. While the first two essays are designed to satisfy readers' curiosity about how to understand why Elisa would present herself as Mario, why any woman would want to marry another woman, and whether such cases have ever been seen in the world, the third section of the day's coverage attempts to address a different sort of question: What, if anything, should be done to punish the women? In other words, “Qué

delito o delitos han cometido los contrayentes?” (“What crime or crimes did the parties commit?”).²⁴

In the previous two sections, the editors relied on external sources to judge the case. In this section, they first summarize the wide gamut of opinions expressed by the public on the legal issue, and then offer their own judgement, which is that at the very least, Elisa could be prosecuted for fraud, or “falsedad.” The following day's issue features a more detailed presentation of legal opinions about the case.

La Voz de Galicia's detailed examination of the social, cultural, historical, and scientific meaning of Mario/Elisa's and Marcela's wedding is reflected in the widespread coverage of the case found in newspapers and journal articles throughout Galicia and the rest of Spain. The “matrimonio sin hombre” was the media event of the year. Over and over, we find journalists and essayists weighing in on how to understand the successful gender pass, and on the marriage itself. While some newspapers featured a harsh judgement of the two women or of their two families, in nearly every case, the focus of the debate was fixed firmly on the implications of the success of Mario/Elisa's pass. Less interest was shown in why Mario/Elisa and Marcela married each other, and considerably more in *how* they managed to do it. As we will see, some newspapers chose to deplore the fact that the case was being covered so extensively, when there were far more important matters to occupy the people of Spain.

The eminent feminist writer and intellectual Emilia Pardo Bazán published a commentary on the case, in which she responded both to the press's attempts to explain the significance of the case, and to the charge, made in some liberal newspapers, that the press's coverage of the story was an irresponsible distraction from weightier national matters. She devoted an installment of her “Vida contemporánea” column to an incisive and ironic reflection on what she called the “insólita novela” (“strange novel”) that had occurred in her home town.²⁵

Between 1895 and 1916, “La vida contemporánea” was a regular feature of the glossy Barcelona weekly *La Ilustración Artística*. This lavishly illustrated periodical represented a markedly different genre from daily newspapers like *La Voz de Galicia*. It was delivered to the homes of its subscribers, rather than sold on the street. Marketed toward the economic and cultural elite of Spain, it rarely reported on local or even national news; indeed, before the War of 1898, its coverage of current events was scarce. Instead, its pages were filled with articles

²⁴ *La Voz de Galicia*, June 24, 1901:1. Note that the editors use the generic masculine “los” in reference to Mario/Elisa and Marcela, even though a reference to two women would require a feminine “las.”

²⁵ The analysis of Pardo Bazán's essay presented here represents an expansion of Joyce Tolliver's “‘La inaudita novela’: La masculinidad femenina en la periodística de Emilia Pardo Bazán,” in *La literatura de Emilia Pardo Bazán*, ed. José Manuel González-Herrán (La Coruña: Real Academia Galega, 2009), 751-57.

on science, with essays by leading intellectuals and politicians such as Emilio Castelar, and with fiction and poetry by Spain's leading writers.²⁶ That such a periodical should publish a piece on what began as a local curiosity suggests not only the free rein it gave Pardo Bazán in her choice of topics, given her stature as a literary and intellectual colossus, but also its editors' recognition of the social significance of the case.²⁷

By discussing the “matrimonio sin hombre” case in the context of her ongoing commentary on Spanish modernity and its attendant changes in social norms and practices, Pardo Bazán contests both *La Voz de Galicia's* initial presentation of the “matrimonio sin hombre” as a tale of a dysfunctional family, and the later journalistic framing of the case, in both *Madrid Cómico* and *El País*, as frivolous distractions from “serious” matters. Pardo Bazán rejects the notion that the case represents a moral, ethical, or national crisis. While the general topic of her column—Contemporary Life—might lead us to expect that she would discuss the “matrimonio sin hombre” as an indication of the confusions and challenges of modernity, her rhetoric is different.

Instead, she follows her apparently facetious initial claim that such a thing is “nunca visto ni oído” (“never before seen nor heard of”) with a discussion that places Mario/Elisa's successful pass firmly within an historical context, situating it in a long and illustrious tradition of transgender passing that includes figures such as the Chevalier d'Eon, whose cross-dressing espionage is discussed in the

²⁶ For an informative overview of *La Ilustración Artística*, see Eduardo Ruiz-Ocaña Dueñas, *La obra periodística de Emilia Pardo Bazán en La Ilustración Artística (1895-1916)* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 2004), 53-101. The entire volume is a valuable reference work for all of Pardo Bazán's contributions to this weekly publication.

²⁷ Pardo Bazán's vast literary production includes over six hundred short stories, over forty novels and novellas, hundreds of essays, seven plays, and two cookbooks. For two years, she was the editor and sole contributor of the monthly intellectual culture journal, *Nuevo Teatro Crítico* (1891-1892), and she was the first woman to lecture at the Ateneo de Madrid. She was the primary voice of Spanish feminist thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Selections of her essays on feminism can be found in Emilia Pardo Bazán, *La mujer española*, ed. Leda Schiavo (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1981) and Emilia Pardo Bazán, *La mujer española y otros escritos*, ed. Guadalupe Gómez-Ferrer (Madrid: Cátedra, 1999). Among the many analyses of Pardo Bazán as a feminist writer, see Maryellen Bieder's “First-Wave Feminisms, 1880-1919,” in *A New History of Iberian Feminisms*, ed. Silvia Bermúdez and Roberta Johnson (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 158-81; and her “Women, Literature, and Society: The Essays of Emilia Pardo Bazán,” in *Spanish Women Writers and the Essay: Gender, Politics, and the Self*, ed. Kathleen M. Glenn and Mercedes Mazquiarán de Rodríguez (Columbus: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 25-54; Pilar Faus, “La Pardo Bazán, campeona del feminismo español,” *Emilia Pardo Bazán: Su época, su vida, su obra*, vol. 1 (La Coruña: Fundación Pedro Barrié de la Maza, 2003), 469- 98; Adna Rosa Rodríguez, *La cuestión feminista en los ensayos de Emilia Pardo Bazán* (La Coruña: Castro, 1991); and Joyce Tolliver, “My Distinguished Friend and Colleague Tula': Emilia Pardo Bazán and Literary-Feminist Polemics,” in *Recovering Spain's Feminist Tradition*, ed. Lisa Vollendorf (New York: Modern Language Association, 2001), 217 - 37.

Alrededor del Mundo essay that had been reprinted in *La Voz de Galicia*. She resists *La Voz de Galicia*'s earlier endogamic denial of transgender phenomena in Spain by explicitly, and extensively, comparing Mario/Elisa with Catalina de Erauso (the “Monja Alférez”).²⁸

For Pardo Bazán, the biographies of both of these historical figures reveal the limits of heteronormative scripts that Mario/Elisa also challenged. Pardo Bazán anticipates the late-twentieth-century notion that transgendered people were “born in the wrong body,” without quite making that exact claim. In keeping with late nineteenth-century positivism, her explanation is more deterministic: given the characteristics of the particular bodies they were born with, both Mario/Elisa and Erauso inevitably inhabited those bodies in ways that confirmed the social scripts assigned to male bodies, rather than to female ones. The situation of the Chevalier d'Eon resembled that of Mario/Elisa, the author suggests, in that he was forced to live in “la más estrecha y dura prisión, que es la prisión de unas faldas.”²⁹ In other words, he, like Mario/Elisa, was *obligated* to enact the script of feminine behavior. At no point does Pardo Bazán consider Mario/Elisa's and Marcela's marriage in moral terms, nor does she allude to the sexual relationship between Mario/Elisa and Marcela which the marriage consecrated and legalized.

Mario/Elisa's masculine self-presentation, which so concerned the members of the reading public, is precisely the aspect of the story that Pardo Bazán finds least important. She casually dismisses the supposedly scandalous question of Elisa's dressing as a male with an offhand comment: “Por cierto que considero uno de los muchos abusos del poder del Estado la prescripción del traje. En no ofendiendo al pudor, ¿por qué no se ha de vestir cada cual como mejor le

²⁸ Emilia Pardo Bazán, “Sobre ascuas,” *La Ilustración Artística* 1019 (8 julio 1901). Pardo Bazán revised and expanded the essay for publication in her collection, *De siglo a siglo (1896-1901)*, *Obras completas*, Vol. 24 (Madrid: Administración, 1911). We refer here to this latter version. It is noteworthy that Carmen Bravo-Villasante includes the shorter, original version of the essay in her edition of selected essays from Pardo Bazán's column, but she changes the title of the essay to “La monja alférez” (Emilia Pardo Bazán, “La Monja Alférez,” *La Vida Contemporánea (1896-1915)*, ed. Carmen Bravo-Villasante, Madrid: E.M.E.S.A., 1972, 126-32). Perhaps Bravo-Villasante retitled the essay simply because the inclusion of an essay about the “asunto ruidoso” would have been too risky during the Franco regime, without some editorial reframing. But she might have had another justification: In 1893, Pardo Bazán published an essay on four women whom she considered the most illustrious in Spanish history, in which Catalina de Erauso figured right alongside Isabel la Católica, the realist novelist Cecilia Böhl de Faber (who wrote under the masculine pseudonym Fernán Caballero), and St. Teresa of Avila (“Cuatro españolas,” *Blanco y Negro* 27 May, 1893: 244-45). It would be easy to argue, then, that when Pardo Bazán compares Mario/Elisa to Erauso, she is elevating her stature to that of a national heroine.

²⁹ “the most constricting prison there is, which is the prison of skirts” (Pardo Bazán, “Sobre ascuas:” 131).

plazca?”³⁰ By placing Mario/Elisa's gender-crossing in the context of historical figures who became national heroes, she implies that there is no harm done when a woman presents herself as a man, and in fact there is a certain merit to be assigned to the successful self-reconstruction. On the contrary, what Pardo Bazán truly considers “inaudita” about the episode is the ingenious way in which, in order to “become” Mario, Elisa managed to navigate the “trabas legales” (“legal obstacles”) which “sujetan y envuelven en su tupida red al individuo, ahogándole” (“subject individuals, smothering them in their thick net”).³¹

Implicitly rejecting the complaints that both the press and the Spanish public are dangerously immersing themselves in distractions at a time of national crisis, Pardo Bazán suggests that, on the contrary, the case of the “matrimonio sin hombre” is deeply significant, and for the following reason: by managing to legally change her status from female to male, Mario/Elisa would gain access to all the rights and privileges of Spanish males:

hecho todo como lo pide la ley, sin faltarle una tilde, ¡cualquiera duda de que ese muchacho alto, esbelto, huesudo, que fuma, que escupe por el colmillo, que anda con desembarazo, no es un varón indiscutido, probado, auténtico, investido de todos los derechos políticos y civiles de que disfruta el varón dentro de nuestra organización social!³²

That is, Pardo Bazán resists the prevailing focus on alleged violations of the script of gender performance, and instead reveals how Elisa's successful self-presentation as Mario poses a threat to the social rights, privileges, and obligations entailed by the category “male.” Clothing choice itself, suggests Pardo Bazán, is insignificant, as are other elements of the gender script of 1901 Spain such as smoking, spitting, and a confident stride. What really matters is the domain of rights and privileges granted to those who convincingly coordinate the myriad aspects of the script of maleness. In other words, Pardo Bazán's analysis of the significance of the “asunto ruidoso” goes right to the heart of the meaning of passing, which lies in the appropriation of social rights and privileges.

The overall trajectory of the press coverage, which began with the original novelesque tale, to the subsequent more probing coverage in the *Voz de Galicia*,

³⁰ “Of course, I consider the prescription of how one should dress to be one of the many abuses of power enacted by the State. As long as there is no offense to modesty, why shouldn't each individual dress as he or she pleases?” (Pardo Bazán, “Sobre ascuas:” 130).

³¹ Pardo Bazán, “Sobre ascuas:” 127.

³² “. . . having done everything the law requires, to the letter, who would ever question that that tall, slender, bony lad, who smokes, who spits between his teeth, who struts around, is not an authentic, undeniable, proven male, invested with all the political and legal rights that men enjoy within the structures of our society!” (Pardo Bazán, “Sobre ascuas”: 128).

to Pardo Bazán's insightful essay into the real issues and stakes present in the case, represents a questioning of the status quo; a questioning that was intensified by the frenzy and depth of the coverage. Correspondingly, some press outlets sought to condemn how their colleagues chose to cover this case, and the intensity with which they did so. No doubt, while papers such as *La Voz de Galicia* inadvertently had fed and sustained this public meditation on some of society's mechanisms for maintaining social order, the press itself was also implicated in that discussion, as it too was a medium for social control.

This is to say that the coverage itself became a matter of debate: the editors of *La Patria*, for instance, disparaged the fact that the "asunto ruidoso" "hace gemir hoy a la prensa y sudar a los cajistas" ("makes printing presses groan and typesetters sweat").³³ The tone of these critical editorials is typically scolding, and the real object of the criticism is the press itself. While all of these pieces acknowledge the underlying social issues revealed by this case, many of them minimize the significance of the public's interest, ascribing it to prurient desire and a low-brow enjoyment of scandal.³⁴

Given the highly political nature of the press at that time, the specific critique by each particular newspaper was a function of the ideological orientation of its editors and readers. The editors of *El País*, for example, make explicit their belief that political agendas should drive the reporting of the news. Rather than to engage with the significance of the couples' transgressions of the boundaries between identity categories, they blame their colleagues in other press outlets for covering the story at all:

Pena, muy profunda pena, es lo que nos produce ver un día y otro día que la llamada *gran prensa*, la que se atribuye nada menos que el cargo de dirigir al público haciéndose a la vez eco fiel de sus opiniones, consagre columnas y más columnas llenas de abominables y nauseabundos detalles, a ese extremo inconcebible

³³ Javier Valcarce Ocampo, "Lo imposible," *El Diario de Pontevedra*, 26 agosto 1901; qtd. in De Gabriel, *Elisa y Marcela: Más allá*, 397.

³⁴ For example, we find this complaint in the liberal newspaper *El País*: "Mamá; pero, ¿se puede casar una mujer con otra? Parécenos estar oyendo en cien mil hogares. Entonces habrá añadido la chica preguntona o el chico, ¿También se podrán casar dos hombres? Porque mira en este periódico los retratos y todo de las dos casadas.... Y he aquí una madre apuradísima teniendo que decir: ¡Que oculte el periódico a los niños!" ("Mamá, can one woman marry another?" we can imagine the question being asked in a hundred thousand homes. And to this, the inquisitive little girl or boy would add, 'Can two men get married too? Because this newspaper has the portraits of the two women who married each other, and everything.' And the poor frantic mother, being forced to say, 'Hide the newspaper from the children'") (*El País*, 5 julio 1901; qtd. in De Gabriel, *Elisa y Marcela: Más allá*, 403.

de la degeneración e inmoralidad desvergonzada... (our emphasis).³⁵

Thus, according to *El País*, by responding to public interest, rather than leading it, the press has failed in its duties to deliver “propaganda a las ideas de justicia, de libertad y de moral” (“the advancement of notions of justice, liberty, and morality”).³⁶

El Diario de Pontevedra, like *El País*, lamented the intensity of the press coverage, and viewed it within the context of the current national crisis. They complained that the depth of interest and coverage of this story eloquently proved

que a tiempo hemos sabido retirar de la circulación pública la manoseada palabrilla *regeneración*, con que a raíz de la pérdida de Cuba y Filipinas hemos estado haciendo el tonto. No; la regeneración no viene ni puede venir, y no porque *Mario Elisa y Marcela* hayan representado una grotesca farsa....³⁷

To their mind, the failure of the press to cover “real” stories, rather than sensationalistic ones such as this case, was an ongoing impediment to national recovery.

³⁵ “It pains us deeply to see that the serious press, which takes upon itself nothing less than the responsibility for guiding the public and for faithfully reproducing its opinions, should, on a daily basis, dedicate columns and columns, full of abominable, nauseating details, to this unimaginable extreme of degeneration and shameless immorality. . .” (*El País*, 5 June, 1901; qtd. in De Gabriel *Más allá*, 400; our emphasis).

³⁶ It is ironic, too, that *El País*, a paper that was aggressively anti-clerical, chose not to exploit the embarrassing failure of the Church in this case. It may have been that their conception of the conflict with the Church was not one that was aimed at the Church’s surveillance and policing of identity categories, but rather its deep ties with the most conservative elements of the state, and how much of the press was complicit in that relationship: “Mal vienen esas pudibundeces de la gran prensa cuando se trata de delitos noticiables cometidos por el clero o por el monaquismo, con esta frescura de propagar hasta las más nimias circunstancias de dicha vergüenza espantosa perpetrada en la Coruña. Hubiéranla realizado monjas o flaminios, y no dijera la prensa una palabra” (“There is an unsavory prudery on the part of the mainstream press when it comes to newsworthy crimes committed by the clergy or by monks, while they are quick to disseminate the most minute details of the shameful scandal perpetrated in La Coruña. Had nuns or priests been involved, the press would not have said a word”) (*El País*, 5 June, 1901; qtd. in De Gabriel *Más allá*, 402; our emphasis).

³⁷ “. . . that we have finally taken out of public circulation that overused little word, 'regeneration,' with which we've been embarrassing ourselves ever since the loss of Cuba and the Philippines. No; there will be no regeneration, nor can there be, and not because 'Mario Elisa and Marcela' have engaged in a grotesque farce. . .” (Javier Valcarce Ocampo, “Lo imposible,” *Diario de Pontevedra*, 26 August, 1901; qtd. in De Gabriel *Más allá*, p. 396).

La Patria, on the other hand, explicitly addressed the question of sexual preference, in which it broadly attributed lesbian practices to repressive sexual conventions regarding heterosexual expression:

Elisa y Marcela fueron sólo amigas en principio; y ... es seguro que si sus primeras confidencias íntimas se hubieran efectuado entre un Mario auténtico y una Marcela núbil y bien constituida, los frutos vivientes de unos amores que se han perpetuado ante el altar dignificarían esa unión sublime, dando ejemplo de fidelidad y sumisión a las leyes naturales. . .³⁸

La Patria's apparent advocacy of sexual freedom—heterosexual freedom, to be sure—might be considered radical, and its representations of Mario/Elisa and Marcela as victims might reflect a more widespread response to the case of tolerance, if not indulgence, of the two women's ruse. Yet, it is important to remember that, according to *La Patria's* representation of the couple as “victimas de una convencionalismo social que más temibles enfermedades y trastornos públicos y privados ocasiona” (“victims of social conventionality that causes more fearsome illnesses and disorders, both public and private”)³⁹ simultaneously affirms the power of normative heterosexuality, as well as of normalized gender identity, thus ironically neutralizing the true radical implications of Elisa's apparently successful transformation into a male and of his marriage to Marcela.

These varied reactions to the press coverage sought to define the limits of what the press should cover, and to defend the press's role as an arbiter of social and political norms. What these editorial interventions did not do was to assertively challenge the inherent threat to the social order that the facts of case implied. That is, they did *not* try to “answer” the questions that the previous coverage had posed, nor mount a serious defense of the aspects of the social order that had been challenged. That was a task taken up by *El Suceso Ilustrado*.

El Suceso Ilustrado, published in Madrid, dedicated nearly all of its July 14th 1901 edition to this case. It belonged to a genre of newspapers that specialized in coverage of lurid and sensationalized crimes. Like its predecessor, *Los Sucesos: Revista ilustrada de actualidades, siniestros, crímenes y causas célebres*, it was modeled after the enormously popular American newspaper, *National Police Gazette*, which Rodríguez Carcela considers the United States'

³⁸ “Elisa and Marcela were just friends at the beginning; and. . . surely if their first intimacies had been exchanged between an authentic Mario and a healthy nubile Marcela, the living fruits of a love that was renewed before the altar would dignify that sublime union, evidencing faithfulness and obedience to the laws of nature. . .” (Daniel Bascuñana Charlofé, “Por Marcela y Elisa: Un informe,” *La Patria*, 25 August, 1901; qtd. in De Gabriel *Más allá*, 406.)

³⁹ Daniel Bascuñana Charlofé, “Por Marcela y Elisa: Un informe,” *La Patria*, 25 August, 1901; qtd. in De Gabriel *Más allá*, 407.

first popular men's magazine.⁴⁰ The *National Police Gazette* featured "crime stories, particularly those involving some sort of love triangles, sensational woman-on-man violence, or gruesome deaths,"⁴¹ all within an unambiguously gendered frame which advanced a specific notion of male interests, judgements and appropriate behavior. That is, the content of the *Police Gazette* directly evoked the script of manliness of that period, projecting an image of how men were expected to behave and what they were to believe in terms of gender and gender roles. To that end, it was plentifully illustrated with drawings of partially dressed women, women engaged in inappropriate behaviors, and gender-inflected violence. In fact, the issue of *El Suceso Ilustrado* that we review here includes on the back page a short report about a crime committed in Paris in which a man had thrown a bottle of sulfuric acid at a young woman, and it is accompanied with a drawing that illustrates the event. We are told, "Se supone que hay en esto una historia pasional que el juez pondrá en claro" ("Presumably there is a story of passion here that the judge will reveal").⁴²

Given that the generic heritage of *El Suceso Ilustrado* advanced a particular model of gender roles and relationships, it comes as no surprise that it would cover the case of Elisa-Mario and Marcela. It begins "No hay mixtificación ni alardes imaginativos de *repórter* asalariado en esta información, adquirida en el propio lugar del suceso por nuestro director" ("In this information, acquired by our editor-in-chief in the very place in which it occurred, there are neither falsifications nor flights of imagination)."⁴³ One can interpret this assertion as a pejorative reference to the curious, open-ended coverage seen in the wider national press. Thus, *El Suceso Ilustrado* challenges the *Voz de Galicia's* broad, inquisitive coverage with its own clear and vigorously attributed assertion of facts, beginning with an extensive interview of Father Cortiella, the priest who baptized Mario and then days later officiated at the now notorious wedding. To accompany that account, the newspaper also reproduces copies both of Mario's baptism certificate and the couple's marriage license. The journal also claims, although incorrectly, to be the first to have published the wedding portrait, which they place on the cover. Likewise, they publish photographs of Father Cortiella, of the church where the marriage was performed, the town where Mario/Elisa and Marcela lived, and even the stagecoach in which they fled from Dumbria. Additionally, the paper transcribes several interviews of people with direct

⁴⁰ Rosa María Rodríguez Carcela, "La prensa de sucesos en el periodismo español," *Revista internacional de historia de la comunicación*, vol. 1, no. 6 (2016): 26.

⁴¹ Brett McKay and Kate McKay, "America's First Popular Men's Magazine: The National Police Gazette," *Manly Knowledge, Travel & Lesuire* www.artofmanliness.com/articles/americas-first-popular-mens-magazine-the-national-police-gazette/. Accessed 15 Nov 2020.

⁴² *Suceso Ilustrado*, 14 July, 1901: 8.

⁴³ *Suceso Ilustrado*, 14 July, 1901: 1.

knowledge of the events, which read very much like police interrogations. Of particular note is the interview with the physician, Manuel Barbeito:

—El reconocimiento practicado, ¿fue espontáneo o por requerimiento del Juzgado?

—Fue espontáneo, a petición del que dijo llamarse Mario, al objeto de resolver las dudas que había sobre pertenecer a sexo indeterminado.

—¿Qué resultó del reconocimiento?

—No pudo ser completo, como hubiera deseado, pues tuvo que limitarse a la inspección exterior y reconocimiento de los órganos sexuales por medio del tacto, no pudiéndose practicar otra clase de reconocimiento por oponerse Mario.⁴⁴

The description of the examination, including a reference to the physician's inspection of Mario/Elisa's genitalia by way of groping, was typical of the sort of sensationalistic detail found in the paper's genre.

The inclusion of this sort of detail in "news" about the case is precisely the sort of thing that editorials like the one published in *El País* objected to. Nevertheless, its inclusion here goes beyond the desire for salacious detail: it represents an important and commonly occurring element in narrations of the unsuccessful pass. Narrations of passes that fail often include an element of ritual shaming, in which there is a public exposure of that which is usually kept private, as a necessary punitive consequence of the violation of social norms. These shaming rituals are often quite explicit, and invite the reader to imagine, in the most graphic terms possible, the "unmasking" of the "true" gender. In this way, the public exposure symbolically represents the victory of the power of the category to regulate behavior and to uphold social structures. The doctor's examination of Mario/Elisa's genitals, a medical procedure usually carried out in the strictest privacy, was meant at least as much to symbolically humiliate a violator of the "natural order" as to reveal the "truth," as the newspaper purported to do.

El Suceso Ilustrado's version of the "matrimonio sin hombre" case, in its efforts to provide the "whole" story, with direct attribution of all the story's

⁴⁴ "—Was the physical examination done spontaneously, or because of a judge's order?

—It was spontaneous, requested by the man calling himself Mario, with the aim of clearing up any doubts about his belonging to an indeterminate sex.

—What did the examination show?

—It could not be completed, as I would have liked, because it was necessarily limited to an external inspection and palpation of the sexual organs. Because Mario objected, it was impossible to carry out any other type of examination" (*El Suceso Ilustrado*, 14 July, 1901: 6).

elements, and to provide as much photographic evidence as possible, is aimed at constraining the range of possible conclusions and speculations that had been prompted by this case. The uncertainty about the facts of the case that had been conveyed in the previous reports had created the conditions for a public meditation on the status of identity categories, which surely was not welcome to upholders of the traditional status quo. As such, the efforts found in *El Suceso Ilustrado* to provide all the “facts,” and to studiously avoid questions as to motivations or their implications, was an attempt to eliminate the socially disruptive frame that had dominated the coverage of this case since the second day, and replace it with one that, by telling the “whole story,” would vindicate the reigning social order. Indeed, the only part of *El Suceso Ilustrado*’s coverage that doesn’t deal with the specific actions taken by the event’s participants is a long section, towards the conclusion of the coverage, that relies on canonical law to argue that Mario/Elisa’s and Marcela’s marriage was not and could not be valid. It is telling that the editor felt it necessary to make this argument, and further indication of the broader public interest in the case at the time. That argument ends in such a way as to frame Elisa-Mario and Marcela in the most negative light possible:

No existiendo elemento alguno de los necesarios para la validez del matrimonio, resulta clarísimo hasta la evidencia que no puede considerarse como tal lo que Marcela y Elisa-Mario han hecho, y que se reduce a una burla sacrílega, salvo las circunstancias del lugar y personas asistentes. Estas, llevadas de la buena fe y por amor de practicar una obra de caridad, concurrieron a la comedia en la que se han ridiculizado los Sacramentos de los cristianos, como en tiempos de Roma se hacía en los teatros.⁴⁵

In keeping with the editors’ defense of the authority of the Church and its power to regulate sexual matters, the newspaper’s commentary goes so far as to compare the transgressive couple with Christianity’s ancient pagan foes. With its long interview of Father Cortiella, combined with its extensive dismissal of the validity of the marriage, *El Suceso Ilustrado* frames this story not as clerical failure, as had been implied in some of the previous coverage, but instead as a sin—and not

⁴⁵ “In the absence of all of the elements that are necessary for the marriage to be valid, all the evidence—with exception of the circumstances of locale and the persons who were in attendance—leads to the clear conclusion that what Marcela and Elisa-Mario have done cannot be considered a marriage. It is nothing more than a sacreligious farce. What those in attendance, who acted in good faith and with the intention of performing an act of charity, witnessed was nothing more than play-acting that ridiculed the Christian sacraments, just as the ancient Romans used to do in their theaters” (*El Suceso Ilustrado*, 14 July, 190: 8).

just a sexual sin, but a social one as well: the sacrilegious abuse of Christian charity.

Having addressed the question of biological sex with its graphic interview of the examining doctor, and the role of the Church, with its interview of the priest and its canonical law argument, the paper ends its coverage with a description of the women's escape from their village. This brief passage is oddly different in tone and style from the rest of its coverage. It makes no reference to the paper's director, and gives no indication as to where the information came from. Finally, the reader finds no direct guidance, no clear didactic conclusion. Instead, the piece's conclusion takes the form of a truncated narrative:

Los mozos de Dumbria, conocedores de la extravagante vida que hacían ambas maestras, se indignaron contra Elisa y trataron de lyncharla, obligándola á salir del pueblo precipitadamente y trasladarse con sigilo á la Coruña.

Quando el mayoral le vió en la carretera, ya transformada en hombre, le reconoció en el acto.

—¿Hay asiento?—le preguntó Mario.

—Lo hay. Suba usted. ¿Qué nombre apunto en el billete?

—Julio Poltrón.⁴⁶

The sudden disappearance of the authoritative voice of the paper's director leaves the reader in the dark both epistemologically and in terms of narrative structure: Did Mario/Elisa/Julio escape successfully? Were the couple apprehended? How did the "matrimonio sin hombre" incident end? And, what are we to make of Mario/Elisa's new assumed name?

But the editor's choice to end the coverage with this malformed narrative might also suggest that the personal narrative of Mario/Elisa and Marcela was less important to the paper's editors than was the significance of their actions. That is, the extensive coverage given by *El Suceso Ilustrado* represents its editors' effort to provide a definitive answer to the questions that the case threw into focus about the status of the categories of gender and sexuality. Thus, this odd narrative, so reminiscent of a *sainete*, begins with the established fact of the "extravagante vida" led by the two schoolteachers, which triggers a societally vindicated act of retributive violence when the young men try to "lynch" Elisa. It is to escape this

⁴⁶ "The young men of Dumbria, who were aware of the extravagant life led by the two schoolteachers, turned on Elisa and tried to lynch her, forcing her to quickly leave the village and slip away to La Coruña. When the coachman saw her on the highway, transformed into a man, he recognized her immediately.

—Are there any seats left?—asked Mario.

—Yes, there are. Climb up. What name should I put on the ticket?

—Julio Poltrón" (*El Suceso Ilustrado*, 14 July, 1901: 8).

mob violence that she dresses as a man again and flees, changing her name. Seen in this way, the editors of *El Suceso Ilustrado* imply that Elisa's self-presentation as Julio, and by extension, her previous self-presentation as Mario, present no threat to gender normativity, because they do not in fact represent a pass. Instead, it is merely a disguise, used in the short term and for a specific purpose.

This transformation is a final and essential component in *El Suceso Ilustrado*'s effort to redirect public understanding of Mario/Elisa's and Marcela's actions, from one that was perceived to challenge the *status quo* to one that was easily identified and punished. After all, a disguise donned to avoid punishment inherently accepts the rules of the game, whereas a pass is a direct challenge to them. By transforming this passing story into one of mere disguise, donned by Elisa in an attempt to shield herself from the "just" consequences of her sexually non-conformist lifestyle, *El Suceso Ilustrado* moves the story away from the socially dangerous speculation that had marked much of the coverage. Seen in this way, the disappearance of the editor's authoritative voice makes sense: rather than narrating the events, the editor reveals, in an unmediated and theatrical manner, the newspaper's version of the "end" of the story. As a result, the narrative functions partly as example and partly as threat; the focus of the story's closure is on the just punishment for violations of gender and sexual codes, rather than on the narrative of Mario/Elisa and Marcela themselves. The editors of *El Suceso Ilustrado* choose to end their story by implying a violent punishment of the couple, which did not occur in the real event.

It is in this frame that the paper's choice of the word "lynchar" is exceptionally telling. The word *lynchar* (or *linchar*) entered Spanish usage in the early 1870's, along with press coverage of the wave of racist lynchings of African-Americans in the post-Reconstruction United States. By 1900, when the usage of the word spiked in Spanish-language texts, it was often used to describe events in Spain, despite the fact that its American origins were still well known.⁴⁷ In the year that interests us for this study, 1901, there are numerous uses of *linchar* in the Spanish press, with the majority of them describing events in Spain, and nearly all following a very specific pattern:

"En el mercado de la Libertad, un municipal ha apaleado a un muchacho, vendedor de flores, por no entregar éste quince céntimos de impuesto municipal. . . . El público, indignados, ha pretendido linchar al paleador, habiendo intervenido unos guardias civiles, que prendieron al energúmeno y apaciguaron el tumulto."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ We searched Google Ngram Viewer for the terms "linchar" and "lynchar" used between 1800-1920, in Spanish, case-insensitive.

⁴⁸ "At Libertad Marketplace, a police officer beat a young boy who was selling flowers for not having paid fifteen *céntimos* in municipal taxes. . . . Members of the public were outraged and

“Un guardia municipal detuvo al buhonero, al que la población, indignada, quería linchar á toda costa.”⁴⁹

“Indignado el pueblo, por tan salvaje hecho, quiso linchar al criminal, evitándolo la guardia civil, encerrando al presbítero en el cuartel.”⁵⁰

Thus, Spanish journalists tended to use the term in a manner that embraced the optics of the perpetrator of the act. In newspaper reports about local events, the term conveyed a notion of extra-judicial justice, in which *el pueblo* seeks an summary punishment for the perceived violation of its norms. Each use of the word here evokes both an indignant community raging to inflict a summary justice, and the forces of order serving to prevent this.⁵¹ Both in English and in Spanish, nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century evocations of “Lynch’s

tried to lynch the bully. Finally, the Civil Guard arrived and arrested the demon and calmed down the teeming masses” (*El Heraldo de Madrid*, April 26, 1901: 1).

⁴⁹ “A city police officer arrested the peddler, whom the outraged crowd tried its best to lynch” (*El Imparcial*, March 13, 1901: 1).

⁵⁰ “The villagers, outraged by such a savage act, tried to lynch the priest, which the Civil Guard kept them from doing by locking the criminal up in jail” (*La Correspondencia de España*, April 9, 1901: 1).

⁵¹ It is precisely this understanding of the term that was evoked in an 1897 article on reforms to the legal system, in which the anonymous journalist asserts that if the errors are not corrected “habrá que proclamar la ley de Lynch” (we’ll have to declare Lynch’s Law) (“La reforma del jurado,” *La Epoca*, December 15th, 1897: 1) Pardo Bazán herself uses the term in exactly the same sense in another 1901 entry of her “Vida contemporánea” column, deploring a recent case of sexual assault in which the Spanish legal system failed the woman who was attacked. In cases like this, she sees Lynch’s law as one of the United States’ virtues: “Esa ley revela el vigor de este pueblo. . . En ciertos casos, en ciertos crímenes, en ciertas iniquidades demasiado escandalosas, ¿qué mejor que la ley de Lynch?” (“That law shows the vigor of this nation. . . In certain cases, for certain crimes, for certain scandalously outrageous injustices, what could be better than Lynch’s Law?” (“Como en las cavernas,” *La Ilustración Artística* 1029, September 16, 1901: 602). This is not to say, however, that Spanish intellectuals were completely unaware of the terrible implications of lynching in the United States. The modernist magazine *Helios*, promoted principally by Juan Ramón Jiménez, published an article by Santiago Pérez Triana, “La mancha negra,” (“The Black Stain”), which traced the role of racism in American history, and argued that lynching was the result of the abolition of slavery among a community that still thought of African Americans only as slaves. It portrays lynching, therefore, as a cruelly unjust and oppressive act. Describing it as the “flor de crimen, flor maldita,” (“the flower of crime, the cursed flower”), Pérez Triana comments bitterly that “cuando el blanco delinque en el Sur, se le lleva a los tribunales; cuando delinque el negro, o se le acusa, o se le sospecha, se le aplica la ley de Lynch” (“When a white man commits a crime in the South, he goes to trial; when a black man commits a crime, or is accused of having done so, or is suspected of it, they apply to him the Law of Lynch”) (Santiago Pérez Triana, “La mancha negra,” *Helios* 1.2 (1903): 346).

Law” were used in a broader variety of situations, and from a wider range of optics, than how the words “lynch” or “lynching” are used today.

Within the framework of our theoretical model, the ritual public murder known in the United States as lynching was an extreme form of category policing, distinct from other forms of category policing—implicit or explicit prohibitions, bias, microaggressions, etc.—only by a matter of degree. As a policing act, its function was similar to that of the ritual shaming we have already discussed, in that, in contrast to some other policing acts, it was intended to be intensely public and explicitly exemplary, not only cutting across the category of race, but serving as a threat across all categories. It is in this context that we can understand Mario/Elisa’s and Marcela’s escape into Portugal, and the alleged failure of the justice system to hold them to account. The gathering mob of young men outside of the schoolteachers’ house, with their implicit threat to apply Lynch’s law, then, is presented in the press as the logical result of the couple’s evasion of punishment at the hands of the law or the Church.

While the director of *El Suceso Ilustrado* seeks to resolve the remaining questions about the details of the “matrimonio sin hombre” and about the proper legal and ecclesiastical response to the transgression, the “mozos de Dumbria,” who serve as synecdoches for the utterly masculinized *pueblo*, instantly identified Mario/Elisa’s violation of gender codes as a threat to the social order, and did not hesitate to try to impose their vigilante-style restoration of order. In reporting on that mob action without comment, the newspaper itself vicariously participates in the attempt to bring Mario/Elisa to extralegal “justice.” The coverage in *El Suceso Ilustrado* thus represents an attempt not just to bring the transgressive pair to what it conceived of as public justice, in the face of the legal and ecclesiastical authorities’ impotence to do so, but to restore the illusory order that Mario/Elisa’s successful pass had disrupted.

The expression in *El Suceso Ilustrado* of the impulse to punish those individuals who have transgressed the boundaries of the gender domain dramatically illustrates the motive that impels this aspect of the press coverage of the “matrimonio sin hombre” case: to silence the public debate about the significance of Mario/Elisa’s successful pass. From the start, the public’s intense interest in the case was scarcely grounded in curiosity about the personal stories of the two women. On the contrary, the attempts of the *Voz de Galicia* and other newspapers to answer the fundamental questions raised by their readers represented an acknowledgement of the deep social significance of the case.

The initial coverage of the “matrimonio sin hombre” case found in *La Voz de Galicia* presented a detailed narrative designed to surprise readers, to make them shake their heads over this “asunto ruidoso,” and to remember what happens to parents who neglect their moral duty to protect their children from harmful influences. Instead, the editors were besieged by questions, not about the details

of the lives of Mario/Elisa and Marcela, but rather about the significance of the transgression of the boundaries of identity categories. In other words, while the members of the reading public may have been surprised by the event, they were also prepared to publicly debate the status of sex and gender as a mechanism of regulation of social rights and privileges.

The “matrimonio sin hombre” case was so surprising to newspaper readers of 1901—as it still is to us today—because it suggested that gender might not be natural and immutable, and therefore its validity as a category of social organization was open to question. This is precisely the insight that Pardo Bazán expressed, within days after the event. But the surprise of today’s readers is double: not only are we surprised to learn that Mario/Elisa managed to legally access all the civil and legal rights that males enjoy, as Pardo Bazán said; it also seems surprising that the attempt was even made. After all, how is it possible that a couple of simple rural schoolteachers recognized the constructed nature of the category of gender—and even of biological sex—a century before our own enlightened times?

In fact, contemporary retellings of the “matrimonio sin hombre” story consistently sidestep the social significance of the event, which the 1901 public identified almost immediately. Mario/Elisa and Marcela are routinely portrayed as two exceptional women who were ahead of their time. In her prologue to De Gabriel's third edition of the “Matrimonio sin hombre” study, Isabel Coixet captures this notion well, praising De Gabriel for making the story “accesible a las generaciones venideras, que han empezado a ver a nuestras protagonistas como unas figuras rabiosamente contemporáneas y actuales: como unas más de nosotras” (“available to future generations, who have begun to see our heroines as figures who are violently contemporary and up-to-date: as just like us”).⁵² The incident is now presented by the Spanish press and by advocacy groups as “Spain's first gay marriage,” and Mario/Elisa and Marcela as heroic pioneers of the struggle for LGBTQ rights.⁵³ Coixet’s 2019 Netflix film, *Elisa y Marcela*, furthers the legend of the two as exceptional women who were motivated by love and passion to defy repressive rural Galician norms that prohibited same-sex love. In this film, as in other current representations, Mario/Elisa is identified simply as

⁵² Isabel Coixet, “Prólogo,” in Narciso de Gabriel, *Elisa y Marcela: Amigas y amantes* (Madrid: Morata, 2019), 16.

⁵³ See, for example, the following online coverage: James Badcock, “[The Lesbian Pioneers Who Fooled Spain's Catholic Church](#),” *BBC News*, 19 February, 2018 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43057841>); “[Lesbian Couple Who Were Married in Spanish Catholic Church](#),”; “[Se viene la película: La historia del primer matrimonio gay de España: Una mujer se disfrazó de hombre para casarse por la Iglesia](#),” *Clarín Viva*, 8 August 2018; Hannah Cogden, “[Interview with Isabel Coixet on Elisa y Marcela](#),” Teddy Award, 15 February, 2019; “[Elisa y Marcela: El primer matrimonio homosexual en España en 1901](#),” *Sobrehistoria*, 13 September 2019; all accessed 15 Nov. 2020.

Elisa, and defined by her presumed lesbian sexual desire—even though this supposed lesbian repeatedly insisted on a transgender identity, called herself Mario even after the wedding ruse was exposed, and referred to herself as a “hermaphrodite.”⁵⁴

The skewed twenty-first century “Elisa y Marcela” narrative—told as the story of two non-conforming women – ironically echoes the framing of the *folletín* about wayward daughters that the *Voz de Galicia* employed on the very first day of its coverage, even though the nonconformity of the two women is now considered admirable rather than deviant. The La Coruña journalists began their coverage by telling a story that confirmed the validity of prevailing social structures involving sexuality, marriage and the family, and the scripts accompanying them: the diabolical Elisa corrupted Marcela because their mothers failed to control them. Likewise, today's accounts frame the event as a different sort of morality tale, which is narrated to reinforce twenty-first-century norms involving marriage and sexuality, and the new scripts that reflect our new norms.

The current construction of the “Elisa and Marcela” narrative as the story of two brave lesbians depends on a depiction of 1901 Galicia as a bigoted backwater, which serves to highlight a certain sense of self-congratulation about how much more tolerant and inclusive we are now. Most significantly, it inserts the 1901 event into a late-twentieth-century concern with individual subjectivity, identity, and self-expression. This reframing comes at the expense of a broader sense of the deep social significance of the transgression of boundaries of identity categories that demarcate the range of social privileges, which was in fact the cornerstone of the “asunto ruidoso.” Ironically, it elides the 1901 exposure of the constructed nature of the domain of gender, which was discussed extensively in newspaper reports across the country, and which Pardo Bazán identified as the truly radical meaning of Mario/Elisa’s successful pass. The surprising aspect of the “matrimonio sin hombre,” then, lies not in its element of scandal, as current representations would have it, but rather in the alacrity with which Spaniards, both urban and provincial alike, passed from scandal to significance, in 1901.

⁵⁴ Undoubtedly, both de Gabriel's Spanish-language books and Coixet's film have put the “matrimonio sin hombre” story on the map—in at least one case, literally. For a fee of ten euros, in April 2019 one could sign up for an “Elisa y Marcela” tour through the streets of Coruña; see Viola de Lesseps, “[Ya se puede reservar el tour](#) que revive la historia de amor de Elisa y Marcela por las calles coruñesas,” (*Diario del viajero*, 11 April, 2019; accessed 15 Nov. 2020). See also “[Una argentina descubre a su bisabuela gracias a 'Elisa y Marcela,'](#) el nuevo filme de Isabel Coixet,” *El País Internacional*, 5 June 2019; accessed 15 Nov. 2020); and Alberto S. Santos, *Amantes de Buenos Aires* (Porto: Porto Editora, 2019). Finally, we are grateful to Lizara García Angulo for drawing our attention to the creative representations of the case found in Xulia Vicente's graphic novel *Elisa e Marcela* (Santiago de Compostela: Consello da Cultura Galega, 2020) and in the theatrical production *Elisa e Marcela, Historia que parece conto*, directed by Gena Baamonde, which debuted on October 5, 2017, in the Auditorio Municipal de Rianxo.