

Elena de Céspedes: The eventful life of a XVI century surgeon

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Abstract

Throughout the history of surgery there have been exceptional cases of surgeons around the world. One of them is Elena/o of Céspedes. Born as a girl, this hermaphrodite dedicated all his life to acting as a man, doing jobs that were only for men such as a soldier, peasant, and surgeon. She was the first licensed surgeon in Spain and maybe in all Europe. She married a woman and then was tried for sodomy by the Spanish Inquisition commanded by inquisitor Lope de Mendoza. She was founded guilty and punished with 200 lashes and a 10-year service at a hospital, dressed as a woman. (Gac Med Mex. 2015;151:502-6)

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Throughout time, medicine has been enriched with the contribution of outstanding women who, in other epochs, where scientific male chauvinism and obscurantism prevailed, managed to stand out at the expense of great effort and sacrifice, which reveals the strong determination of these women and gives us an example of integrity and coherence with their ideals. We can cite countless examples, but suffice it to cite the eventful life of a 16th century women, considered one of the first female surgeons and who carried the name of Elena de Céspedes.

Elena de Céspedes

Elena, o also known as Eleno for reasons we are going to explain in this work, saw the first light around

the year of 1546 in Alhama, a small town located at 55-km distance of the Kingdom of Granada, Spain. She was born in the house of Benito de Medina, a wealthy tradesman. She was fruit of the relationship of a Moor-African slave named Francisca de Medina (since she belonged to that man) with her owner. Born a girl, Elena had a childhood on which no reports exist and, therefore, there is no more knowledge than the marks branded on her face to identify her as a slave¹.

At some moment of her adolescence she moved to Jaén, probably due to familiar issues. At 15 or 16 years of age she had a child resulting of the relationship she was forced to contract with a construction worker named Cristóbal de Lombardo. At the moment her pregnancy was known, she was abandoned, which caused great impact on Elena's life (possibly generating

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changes in her personality). Apparently, at the moment of her child's birth, she suffered changes in the genital area presenting a size increase of her clitoris, resembling a small-sized penis. It is from then on that she started having a manly behavior. Subsequently, she travelled to the city of Sevilla, where she left her son with a family when she lost all interest on raising him.

She was a hard-working woman, impulsive, impetuous, who was interested on jobs then considered to be for "gentlemen". Never well understood by her contemporaries, she decided to seek fortune in Granada, where she learned the trade of weaver, hosier and tailor being at the service of the clergyman of San Miguel. In this epoch she seems to have been in an environment of low lives. She moved from Sanlúcar de Barrameda to Jerez de la Frontera, where in a quarrel she injured her opponent with a knife and she was incarcerated. When she left jail she decided to abandon the female clothing to dress as a man. With no parents, no husband and no family, and with a new identity, she lived in solitude and she wandered away from Andalucía².

During the years of 1568 to 1571, the entire region of Granada was shaken by a social conflict known as the war of Alpujarras or war of the Moriscos. This problem originated by a decree of King Philip II, which restricted cultural and religious diversities across the whole region. For this reason, a large number of Moors sublevated against the current regent. Elena found in this war an opportunity to continue with male activities by joining the Spanish army in Don Luis Ponce de León Company, where she took part in several combats.

After this period of war, Elena moved to Madrid, where she arrived by 1575-1576. She looked for places where to work and found shelter as an assistant to a surgeon. She earned the surgeon's trust, who taught her anatomy and surgical techniques. She had some Latin knowledge and she even managed to get some medical books. Later, she was granted a Surgeon license by the *Protomedicato* in late 1577. It is as a result of this fact that she is postulated as being the first female surgeon in Spain and perhaps in Europe.

By 1586, Elena started performing activities typical of a 16th century surgeon: cure of abscesses and wounds, dental extractions, management of amputations, among others. She travelled around the entire southern-central Spanish region until her arrival to Yepes, a small village on the province of Toledo. She

settled down and started to practice as a surgeon. During her stay in this village she met María del Caño, native to Ciempozuelos.

Marie-Catherine Barbazza, in her text "A case of social subversion: the process of Elena de Céspedes (1587-1589)", with regard to the Elena de Céspedes studies and falling in love describes the following³:

"[...] And since the trade proved advantageous to her, she left off the tailor trade and took up that of surgeon, and she was in the Court's hospital after which she went to the Escorial to cure Obregón, who was a servant of his Majesty. She began to cure publicly and travelled across those places of the mountains for more than two years. And there she was accused of practicing without having been examined, and she came to the Court where she was examined and obtained two titles to be able to bleed and purge and for surgery. And she remained in the Court curing for a long time until she was brought to Cuenca where she cured for nine months, and from there she came to la Guarda, where she settled down and practiced as a surgeon for about six years, coming and going to the Court many times in that epoch. And for problems she had in la Guarda, she joined a company that was passing by to cure wounded soldiers... and arrived with them to Pinto, and from there she came to Valdemoro, where she remained about two years, and sometimes she was brought to cure as far as Cienpozuelos. And having fallen ill, she was hosted by said Francisco del Cano, her father in law and she was lavished with care and attention and she became fond of María del Cano, daughter of said Francisco del Cano, and vice versa, and asked her parents for her hand in marriage, and they said that if that was God's will, so be it..."

During the 16th century, all weddings had to be approved by the General Vicar of the province where the wedding was intended to take place. For that reason, Elena had to attend an audience with the General Vicar of Madrid in order for him to allow for banns to be posted in the town of Yepes. At the moment the marriage license was requested, the General Vicar of Madrid had certain doubts on Elena's physical appearance, since she lacked facial hair, had delicate features and a high-pitched voice, which prompted the Vicar to have Elena sent to be examined. The number of clandestine marriages and the crime of bigamy made priests of that epoch very prudent. After having been assessed by physicians and other witnesses, she managed to obtain the license and banns for the marriage were published.



Figure 1. Elena/Eleno de Céspedes.

It was then that Dr. Francisco Díaz, personal doctor of Felipe II, King of Spain, and author of the first urology treatise, assessed Elena/o aided by Dr. Antonio Mancilla, reporting that: “he had his *genital member sufficient and perfect with its testicles, like any man, and that nearby the anus he had some kind of folding that did not seem natural.*” Still with doubts, she underwent more examinations at the vicar’s request, which failed to demonstrate that she was not a male, thus enabling her to receive the sacrament of marriage. The event was held in Ciempozuelos, Madrid, in 1586. Other reason that put Elena/o de Céspedes marriage at risk, was the appearance of Isabel Ortiz, who claimed that she had been engaged with her previously. Figure 1 depicts Elena/o already as a surgeon and married. Figure 2 shows a bust of Spanish urologist Francisco Díaz⁴.

One year later she was accused of sodomy by a neighbor. In that moment, sodomy was any homosexual act and it was a religious crime pursued by the Holy

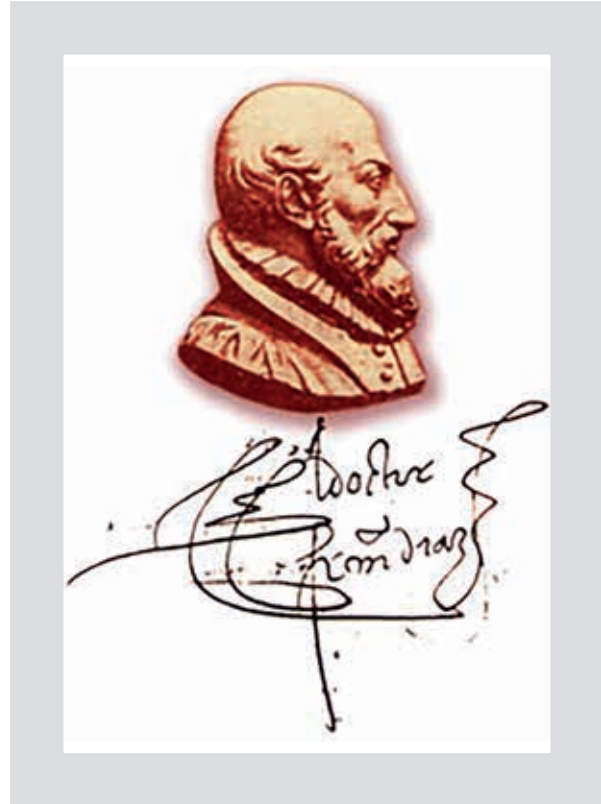


Figure 2. Image of the bust and signature of Dr. Francisco Díaz, father of urology.

Inquisition. For that reason, on July 17, 1587, Elena/o was brought before the Inquisition for the crimes of sodomy, missappropriation of male clothing, heresy and marriage profanation by not respecting its purpose and natural law, which is procreation. She was brought to trial in Ocaña (Toledo) by the Tribunal of Toledo, which was characterized for its busy schedule and high rate of convictions. Before the court, lead by Inquisitor Lope de Mendoza, Elena/o swore to tell the truth and defended herself by arguing her hermaphroditism, and that this unique gender status allowed her to live as a man or a woman – in God’s service, aseverating that at the moment she married María del Caño she was a man and claiming that she never used the Devil’s dark magic. During the trial she was evaluated by physicians and nursemaids of the court. All found her to be a female. One year later, in 1588, after multiple testimonies and assessments by physicians, lawyers and midwives, the Tribunal of Toledo, in charge of Inquisitor Lope de Mendoza, found the defendant guilty of the charges of sodomy, bigamy and mockery of the sacrament of marriage. Elena/o de Céspedes always maintained firmly her statements advocating

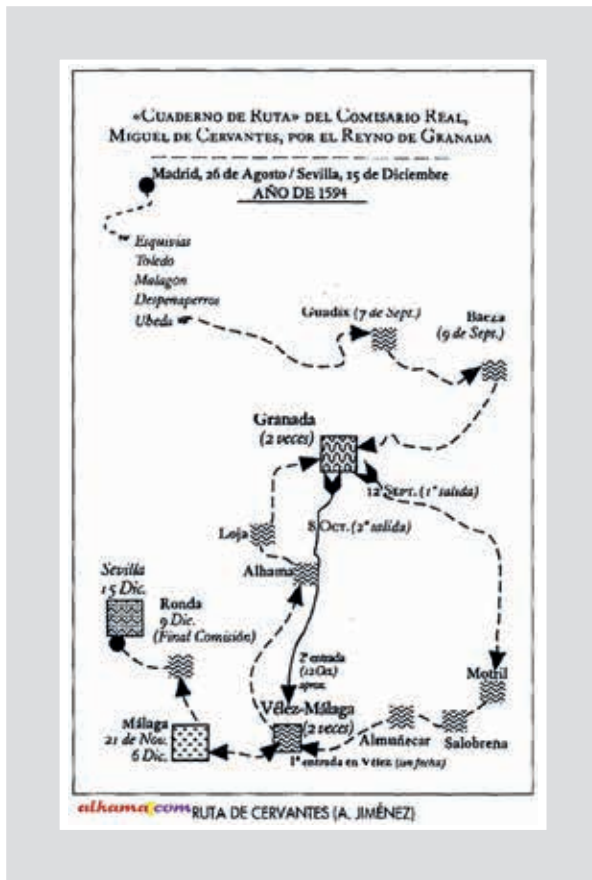


Figure 3. Map of Miguel de Cervantes routes as collector for the Kingdom of Granada. As the map shows, he visited Alhama in his itinerary.

her innocence. The punishment consisted in 200 lashes and being forced to serve for 10 years in a hospital, in woman's garb and without pay⁴⁻⁸.

"[...] we mandate that as a penalty for her as a punishment and as an example for others to refrain of committing such lies and tricks, she shall walk in procession to appear in this auto-da-fé wearing the corza and garments identifying her crime where she is to be read that sentence and make abjuration de levi, and other day she will receive hundred lashes in the public streets of this city and other hundred in the village of Cienpozuelos in the customary form where this sentence will also be read again in the parochial church of said village on a sunday or holyday, and to be secluded for ten years in the hospital to be appointed by us in order for her to serve with no pay in its infirmaries, and she must do and fulfill all this under penalty of being punished with all rigour and by this our definitive sentence so we pronounce and mandate it in these writings..."

It is difficult to demonstrate if the Elena/o de Céspedes case is about a hermaphrodite, pseudohermaphrodite, transexual or lesbian. One thing that can be assured is that this represented the struggle of a person trying to go against established rules of the moment, where there was no place for women in a society ruled by men.

Elena de Céspedes and literature

Elena/o de Céspedes' case acquired great fame on the second half of the sixteenth century; it was with no doubt the first of its kind and was the subject of conversation in the entire province of Granada. Around 1594, Miguel de Cervantes, the renowned Spanish writer, worked as a tax collector for the Kingdom of Granada, visiting places such as Vélez-Málaga, Alhama and Loja. It is probable that during this visit the writer heard of the renowned case of Elena de Céspedes (Fig. 3).

Later, in 1617, Cervantes published his last novel *Los Trabajos de Persiles y Segismunda: Historia Setentrional*, a work that consisted of two books. In the eight chapter of the second book appears the character of Cenotia, which depicts a sorcerer of Alhamenian origin (same as Elena) who introduces herself in the novel as follows: "My name is Cenotia, I am native of Spain, born and raised in Alhama, a city of the Kingdom of Granada; known by my name throughout all kingdoms of Spain, and even in many others, because my ability does not allow for my name to be concealed, with my works making me renowned. I left my homeland, about four years ago, evading the surveillance the mastiff guards have on the catholic flock. My lineage is Moslem; my exercises, those from Zoroastes, and on them I am unique" (Fig. 4).

The fame of this story has even reached 21st century writers. Agustín Sánchez Vidal, a Spanish novelist, selected the subject of Elena/o de Céspedes to publish one of his latest historical novels: *Esclava de Nadie*, based on the peculiar life of this character⁹.

Conclusions

The Elena/o de Céspedes character appears to emerge from a novel. A woman born slave, during an epoch where repression marked the life of the female gender, who decided for biological issues to behave as a man and even to change gender practicing trades and works that were exclusively assigned to men in that time, such as tailor, surgeon and soldier. She

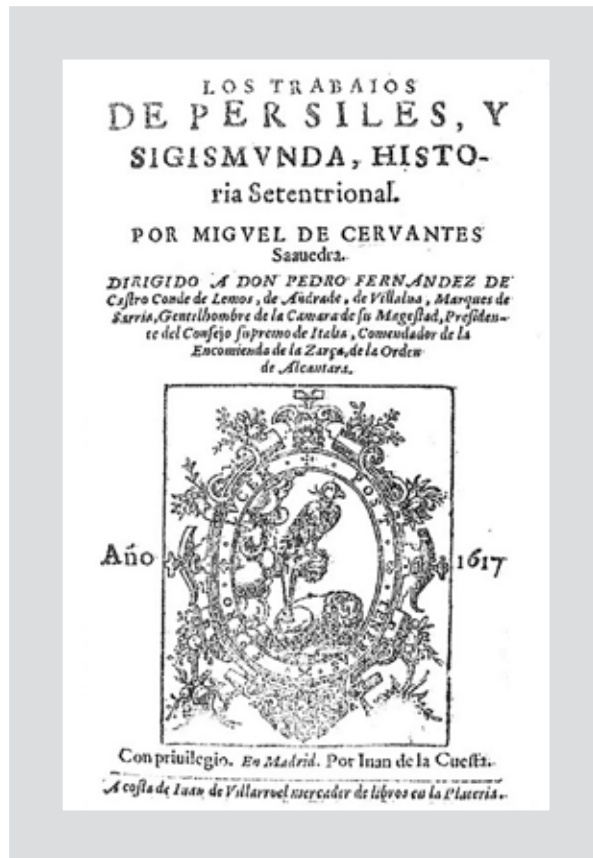


Figure 4. Original 1617 cover of *Los Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda: Historia Setentrional*, last novel written by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, where Elena/o is depicted as a sourcerer.

should be considered as the first female surgeon, even with her characteristics, which made her special. She was also able to defend herself before one of the most powerful Inquisition tribunals from sixteenth century Spain, the Toledo Tribunal. She alleged at all times her hermaphroditism and even was able to trick renowned physicians, such as Dr. Francisco Díaz, father of urology and personal doctor to Philip II. Even with all controversies and myths around her story, Elena/o de Céspedes is the first female surgeon and one of the most controversial women in the history of medicine.

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