

CHAPTER 8

Four Historical Figures Who Cross-Dressed: The Adventurer, the Ambassador, the Surgeon, and the Seamstress

Key Questions

1. Why did people in the past cross-dress? How is cross-dressing different now? How is it the same?
2. Can the words transgender or trans be correctly used when discussing people in the past, before these words were invented? What are some complexities of ascribing a trans identity to people from the past?
3. What are some of the differences between a person writing their own life story (an autobiography) and a scholar writing that same life story (a biography)? What are some of the similarities?
4. How were the individuals who cross-dressed written and talked about during their lifetimes? Historically, were they written about with respect? How are they written about today?
5. As you read through this chapter, consider the individuals discussed. Where did they live? What century did they live in? What were the conditions of their lives? What can we surmise about the cultures and societies that they were part of?

6. How did intersecting identities affect each of the individuals whose stories are told in this chapter? What parallels can you draw between these individuals and other examples of intersecting identities throughout this book?

Chapter Overview

How does what you wear define who you are? Keep this question in mind as you read this chapter, which explores individuals who cross-dressed in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Chapter 7 focused on various cultures that, historically, honored the possibility of diverse gender identities beyond a male-female binary. Generally speaking, this chapter returns to the gender binary by exploring three individuals who traversed this binary: Catalina/Don Antonio de Erauso, Dr. James Miranda Barry, and Frances Thompson. A fourth person, the Chevalier/Chevalière d'Éon, poses an interesting case study because they never fully embraced either side of the gender binary.

Learning about these individuals requires an understanding of the time periods in which they lived, their geographic locations, their social and cultural backgrounds, and their family structures or lack of family structures. Their choice of clothing became a powerful way for them to present themselves to the world. The change in clothing was their first step in projecting their gender identities to the outside world. Though the four people explored in this chapter may have started to cross-dress because of a specific situation, it is clear that the new gender they embodied by way of their clothing was complex and, in most cases, permanent.

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