

Favez or the Secret of Henriette Faver Caven

Alberto Enrique D'Ottavio Cattani^{1,2}

¹Cátedra de Histología y Embriología. Facultad de Ciencias Médicas. ²Consejo de Investigaciones de la Universidad Nacional de Rosario (Argentina).

Correspondence: Alberto Enrique D'Ottavio Cattani, Matheu 371. 2000 Rosario, Santa Fe (Argentina).

e-mail: acedottavio@hotmail.com

Received 2 November 2007; accepted 19 January 2008

Summary

Unlike the theatre and literature, the cinema does not seem to have sufficiently addressed gender discrimination in Medicine. From this perspective, the present work addresses the eventful life of Henriette Faver Caven, who had to study, practise and impart her medical acumen dressed as a man, and rescues its current repercussions in cinematography. Henriette Faver Caven is sketched from her birth to her death through an analysis of the different phases of her life (orphaned at an early age, the death of her uncle, husband and daughter, cross-dressing, graduation, her involvement in the war, prison, emigration to Cuba -the first female doctor on the island- her professional activities, homosexual marriage, trial, conviction and exile). At the same time, we allude to two Cuban films about her life by Lidice Pérez López [*Enriqueta Faver* (1998) and *Favez* (2004), with their different presentations at cinematographic festivals]. We estimate that this issue and corresponding cinematographic initiatives are of great value for debating not only the harsh story of the access of this woman to formal studies in general, and university level education in particular, but also the problems of gender, and to relate this singular existence to both its cinematographic recreations and its literary and theatrical repercussions.

Keywords: Discrimination, Gender, Cinema, Medicine, Henriette Faver Caven.

Although the admission and graduation from Medical Schools currently do not pose any problems to women as regards their condition, in the case of management positions problems continue to exist. What is to be said then of the difficulties involved in women accessing, remaining in, graduating from and exercising the profession along time in general, and even today as regards certain aspects?¹.

Unlike the theatre and literature, the cinema does not seem to have sufficiently addressed gender discrimination in Medicine. From this perspective, the present work addresses the eventful life of Henriette Faver Caven, who had to study, practise and impart her medical acumen dressed as a man and relates this singular existence to both its cinematographic recreations and its literary and theatrical repercussions.

A singular life

Henriette Faver Caven (Enrique or Enriqueta Faber, Faver or Favez) was born in the Place de

la Riponne (Lausanne, Switzerland) in 1791 (other Canton documents situate her birth in Bavois in 1786) (Figure 1). She was orphaned at an early age and remained as the ward of her uncle, who was a colonel in the Swiss regiment under French mandate in Revolutionary Times. Since from a young age, according to her uncle, she did not show any interest in the customs of the women of those times, he tried to marry her off in order to place her in the role assigned by tradition^{2,3}.

Obeying family counsel, she married a man in the military –Jean Baptiste Renau– with whom she had a daughter who died only 8 days after her birth. Henriette's husband and uncle died in the Napoleonic War with Germany. A widow at 18, she decided to earn a living through her own efforts and, convinced that as a woman she only had the options of married life or prostitution, she studied Medicine in Paris under the name of Henri Faver (other surnames cite her as Fuenmayor) and she eventually gained a Degree in Surgery^{2,3}.



Figure 1: The dual reality of Henriette Faver Caven (Enrique or Enriqueta Faber, Faver or Favez)

In 1812, she began to work as a military physician under the orders of the renowned surgeon Dominique-Jean Larey in Napoleon's campaign in Russia (Figure 2), during which she fell deeply in love with a handsome officer of the Ninth Hussars. Her life, however, changed in 1813, when she was taken prisoner by the troops of Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, who defeated José Napoleon at the Battle of Vitoria (Spain), a battle that made the Corsican return the crown to Fernando VII. As a physician, she worked at the hospital in Miranda de Ebro and after the peace, signed in 1814, - and by this time demobbed- she decided to move to the Caribbean. First she went to Paris and from there to

Guadalupe (French Antilles), finally arriving in Cuba^{2,3}.

On 19 January 1819, she arrived in Santiago de Cuba on the ship "La Helvetica". She was described as a young man, with refined manners, whose personal traits were as follows: a height of four foot-ten, white complexion, blue eyes, a narrow forehead, blond hair and eyebrows, a plump nose, small mouth, no beard and signs of having suffered from smallpox, 25 years of age, and of the Catholic faith^{2,3}.

To settle her situation on Cuba and be able to practise medicine, she moved to La Habana. Mingling with the crowd in political protests in the Island's capital, where both the people and the troops had sworn fealty to the Constitution of 1812, she entered the Palace and asked permission to practise her profession under the name of Enrique Faver. After the requisite inspections, she was authorised to practise medicine throughout Cuban territory and she was designated fiscal of the *Tribunal Protomedicato* in Baracoa, located on the extreme eastern side of the island^{2,3}.

During her stay there, she was asked to attend -pro-bono- a young girl with consumption: Juana de León, who lived miserably in a shack, under the supervision and protection of a laundress. Won over by compassion towards Juana's unfortunate situation, she proposed a formal, although not real, marriage "with a view to prolonging her (Juana's) life and to offering her company and even stimuli to fight against the ills of society. When Juana refused, she offered the following confidence: "My life is based on a terrible secret that for the time being I cannot reveal; perhaps I shall do so later but for now it is impossible. If you were to marry as usual, like other women, you would soon succumb. My temperament, as cold as marble, will not take the strong impressions of material love". She also explained that in public they would be spouses but within their marriage only two friends and, at the same time, she offered Juana the possibility of becoming a Christian so that they could get married, Juana could become happy, and be able to seek the salvation of her soul^{2,3}.

On 11 August 1819 they were married at the Parrish Church of *Nuestra Señora de Baracoa*. The first months of their married life passed happily for the two spouses. However, Juana, at that time convalescing from her illness, was not happy with her "husband's" life as a friend and faced with "his" evasiveness not only became suspicious and gloomier but also began to suspect "his" true identity. Within this



Figure 2: Henriette Faver the soldier (cover of the book *Mujer en traje de batalla* by Benítez Rojo)

situation, she was comforted and counselled by José Angel Garrido, the best man at the wedding^{2,3}.

In those times, Henriquette Faber received from La Habana a notification forbidding her to practise medicine which she did not have official authorisation for, since it was rumoured that her credentials were false and that she belonged to the family of a relative who had died in the Napoleonic wars. She therefore went to the capital, promising Juana that when she returned she would reveal her secret^{2,3}.

After the pertinent documents and her license to practise had arrived, but overwhelmed by her own situation, she visited the Bishop of the capital, Don Juan José Díaz Espada y Landa, to whom she confessed her worries. He spoke to her about the severity of her situation and recommended, so that she would have the absolution of God, that she return immediately to Baracoa; that she tell Juana (who was to present a case to the tribunals) everything, and once the sentence had been dictated she should devote her life to attending to the sick and infirm under as a nun of the Order of The Sisters of Mercy^{2,3}.

After her return to Baracoa, although at the beginning Henriquette did not follow the Bishop's instructions because she thought he was cruelly unfeeling, she finally confessed the truth to Juana. Although they agreed to go on living together in peace, as though they were sisters, the situation gradually became untenable and separation was eventually unavoidable. Henriquette therefore went to Tiguabos (also on the eastern coast of Cuba) where the rumours about her condition as a woman were exacerbated by accusations of lesbianism. There, she frequented the company of the low-lives, with whom there were frequent disputes. One day, at Caney and after a lot of drinking, she was stripped in public and her true sex was revealed. She swore that she would kill one of the men there who had wished to abuse her^{2,3}.

In January 1823, Juana de Leon brought a case against her, through Garrido, for annulment. Henriquette was taken prisoner in February and on the 17th a case with the following notation was opened: "*Suite against Enriqueta Faber (no Faver) for having in public dressed as a man* (today to be found in the Cuban National Archives) and the sentences was that: *she must present herself to explain her condition and physical impotence and she should present herself in this city and—in front of the tribunal- be examined before two doctors who, after having ascertained her true sex, shall make the necessary provisions for*

her security in the public goal until further juridical notice as regards costs, which should only be those deemed necessary^{2,3}.

Although she attempted to escape such an examination, confessing her true sex, she was in the end subjected to that humiliating public experience. And when she was kept captive she tried to poison herself, having heard that she was to be paraded publicly through the streets^{2,3}.

In June of that year, a tribunal in Santiago de Cuba published the sentence, condemning her to 10 years' prison at the *Casa de Corrigendas* in La Habana, under the special supervision of the authorities, where she was to remain until she was sent to some place abroad after that sentence^{2,3}.

This sentence was appealed before a public hearing in Puerto Príncipe by her lawyer, Manuel Vidaurre. Of his brilliant rendition we know the following: *She is not a murderer. Society has been more culpable than she is as from the moment at which it negated civil and political liberties to women, converting them to chattel for the pleasures of men. My defendant acted logically when dressing as a man, not only because the laws do not prohibit this but because dressed as such she would be able to study, work, and have freedom in her own actions—in all senses—to commit good deeds. What kind of criminal is one who loves and respects her parents, who follows her husband among the deafening roars of bloody battles, who cures the wounded, welcomes and educates the unfortunate blacks, and gets married merely to give succour to a poor, ill orphan. She, who although a woman, refused to aspire to the sad but easy resort to prostitution...* At the moment, the prosecutor interrupted with *she must be a saint*, to which Vidaurre replied *or better, a victim*^{2,3}.

The result of the hearing was a reduction in her sentence to four years at the *Hospital de San Francisco de Paula* in La Habana (Figure 3), dressed as a woman. After this, she left Spanish territory. This was the first Cuban hospital in which a women doctor was first able to practise medicine^{2,3}.

This sentence led to a complete breakdown in her life, turning her from a person of gentle and pacific nature to one who was quarrelsome and irate. When she attempted to flee the hospital, under Episcopal orders she was transferred to the *Casas de Recogidas* in San Juan de Nepomuceno in La Habana. There, she was to create such disturbances that she was eventually sent to the United States^{2,3}.

The short note of the colonial Cuban authorities reads more or less as: *Enriqueta Faber Caven*.



Figure 3: Hospital de San Francisco de Paula in La Habana

Born in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1791. Subject of the king of France. She has completed 4 years of internment at the Women's Hospital in La Havana. She committed the following crimes: falsification of documents, bribery, incitation to violence, illegal practice of medicine, imposture (she pretended to be a man), violation and grave threats to the institution of matrimony. She has been forbidden to reside in Cuba or in any other dominion of the Spanish Crown. She now remains at the disposal of the authorities of New Orleans^{2,3}.

On 31 July 184, she travelled to New Orleans where she became a recluse and worked as a nurse in the "Charity Organization". Having become identified with her Catholic assumptions, she took the habit under the name of Sister Magdalena. She gave part of her benefits to the poor and in the end became Mother Superior of the Congregation³.

In 1844, she spent time as a missionary in Veracruz (Mexico), after which she founded the branch of the Congregation to which she belonged in Guadalajara, and finally went to New Orleans, where she died at the age of 65. For other authors, after her arrival in New Orleans she was untraceable^{3,4}.

In turn Juana, eight years after the event and at her own home in Baracoa, married Don Eduardo Miguel Chicoy, a man of indubitable virility^{3,4}.

Contrary to what might be imagined, the case of Enriqueta Faber was not unusual since several women even before her served in wartime and were only found out to be women when they were wounded and arrived at the hospital, or during their autopsies. This was the case of another woman doctor of the times: Miranda Stuart Barry¹.

The first woman in Cuba legally authorised by the *Protomedicato* in La Habana, Enriqueta was a

pioneer of the feminist movement in the world and on the island. Dr. Roig (1965) relates her case as follows: *After having much meditated on the matter and subjecting your conduct to the crucible of my honest conscience and the scalpel of my austere nature, I completely and unreservedly absolve you².*

Enriqueta managed to remain faithful to her ideas, live with authenticity, and fight against the social prejudices of her times. The real person, little known in Cuba and almost completely unheard of in the rest of the world, was discovered by Benito Rojo 20 years ago when he was leafing through some early chronicles of the city of Santiago de Cuba⁴. Currently she is someone with considerable weight in the Cuban cultural scene.

It should be noted, too, that apart from Enriqueta Faver other women also were forced to practise cross-dressing in order to follow university studies. As examples, we have the American Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919); the above-mentioned Irish James Miranda Stuart Barry (possibly Miranda Stuart) (1795-1865), and a Spanish lawyer, Concepción Arenal (1820-1893)¹ (Figure 4). With the exception of Faver, none of them has been "rescued" by the cinema.

Enriqueta Faver in the cinema

One of the most prolific and prominent branches of Cuban cinema in the last 40 years has been the short film and the documentary. This accounts for why Faver's vicissitudes were portrayed in the short film entitled *Enriqueta Faver*, filmed and shown in 1998. Written and directed by Lídice Pérez López, it lies under the heading of "cortometraje" (short film) (15 minutes). The main actress was Esther Fernández in the part of Enriqueta and Gisela Vilaboy in the part of Juana. The original music was by Adrián Torres; the cameras were under the supervision of Dagoberto René Loys, and David Rabelo, the editing corresponding to Jesús Otaño. The film is Cuban, in Spanish, and it was sponsored by the *Escuela de Radio, Cine y Televisión* of the Cuban Higher Arts Council⁵.

The film won an award for fiction at the XXV Film Club Festival held in Santa Clara (Cuba) in 1998.

In 2004, Lídice Pérez López extended the first version in a documentary video lasting 28 minutes ("*mediometraje*") entitled *Favez* on Beta SP support. The documentary was in Spanish and the main part was



Figure 4: Three women who were forced to cross-dress as men for professional reasons: Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919), James Miranda Stuart Barry (possibly Miranda Stuart) (1795-1865), and Concepción Arenal (1820-1893)

played by Graziella Torrigiani (trained in Lausanne, Switzerland –coincident with the place of birth of Henriette), while Juana was played by Tamara Melián⁶.

This video was presented at several festivals: the 26th International Festival of New Latin-American Cinema at La Habana (Cuba) in December 2004 (the most important of its type in Latin America); at the 7th Annual Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, presented by Sundance Channel and Comcast, Miami (USA) April-May 2005; at the Latin-American Cinema and Video Festival (CINESUL) held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in June 2005; at the Latin-American Cinema Festival in Trieste (Italy) in October 2005, and at the 7th Filmar Festival in Latin America, held in Berne (Switzerland) in November, 2005 (with French subtitles). The synopsis of the film reads: *Cuba, 1823. A scandalous happening occupies the spirit of the inhabitants of Santiago de Cuba: the case of the woman doctor. A story about the life of Henriette Favez, of Swiss origin, the first woman doctor in Cuba, who - to practise her profession- cross-dressed as a man.*

A critical reference of interest concerning *Favez* can be found in an article penned by Sophie Balbo in 2004⁷.

Among the projects fostered by *Cinergia* (the Audiovisual Support Fund for Central America and the Caribbean) one finds:

In 2004, the script of *Crimen Inocente*, by José Ramón Marcos (Cuba), with the synopsis: *In order to be*

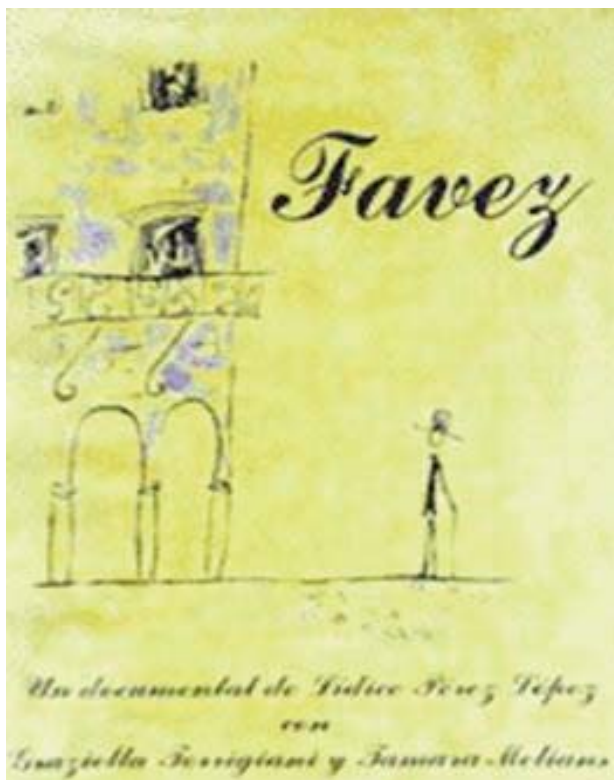
able to study and practise medicine, a woman, Enriqueta Faber, dresses as a man. The need to hide her condition as a woman conflicts with her fealty to her profession and her desires as a woman. Once the secret has been discovered, social convention does not pardon her daring and destroys her as a woman and as a professional.

In 2007, the script of the fiction *Enriqueta, or the last days of a man*, by Patricia Ramos (Cuba), with the synopsis: *Nineteenth century. A foreign woman, Enriqueta, who is a doctor cross-dresses as a man upon arriving in a small village on the eastern side of Cuba. All goes well until she decides to marry another woman and at the same time have a male lover. This brings the scandal to a boil*⁸ (Figure 5).

To end, we value this topic and these cinematographic initiatives as being of great interest in the debate not only of the hardships undergone by



Figure 5: Still of the marriage of Enriqueta Favercon to Juana de León, in *Favez* (2004)



Promotional "afiche" of *Favez* (2005)

women as regards formal studies in general, and university level education in particular, but also for addressing the problems of gender and relating the life of this singular woman to the cinematographic recreations, several of them literary and theatrical.

In sum, all this enhances the well known and fecund relationship between teaching and the cinema^{9,10}.

References

- 1.- Carrera LI: Elección de la carrera médica por parte de las mujeres en la Universidad Nacional de Rosario. Tesis de Maestría en Educación Universitaria. Facultad de Humanidades y Artes. Rosario: Universidad Nacional de Rosario; 2008.
- 2.- Roig de Leuchsenring E. Médicos y medicina en Cuba: historia, biografías, costumbrismo. La Habana: Museo Histórico de las Ciencias Médicas Carlos J. Finlay; 1965. p. 31- 49.
- 3.- López Martínez M. La primera médico en Cuba, ¿leyenda o realidad? Avances Médicos de Cuba 1998; 5(15):58-59.
- 4.- Benítez Rojo A. Mujer en traje de batalla. Madrid: Alfaguara; 2001.
- 5.- Enriqueta Faber (1998) [database on the Internet]. The Internet Movie Database. [cited 2007 July 25] Available from: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0482947/>
- 6.- Favez (2005) [database on the Internet]. The Internet Movie Database. [cited 2007 July 25] Available from: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0470755/>
- 7.- Balbo S. Henriette Favez, travestie vaudoise qui fascine Cuba. Latitudes 2004 [citado 25 julio 2007] Available from: <http://largeur.com/expArt.asp?artID=1706>
- 8.- Cinerгия: Proyectos apoyados [homepage on the Internet]. San José de Costa Rica: Fondo de fomento al audiovisual de Centroamérica y el Caribe [cited 2007 July 25]. [about 21 screens]. Available from: http://www.cinerгия.org/2008/proyectos_apoyados.html
- 9.- Loscos J, Baños JE, Loscos F, de la Cámara J: Medicine, cinema and literature: A teaching experiment at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. J Med Mov. [serial on the Internet]. 2006 [cited 2007 October 10]; 2(4): 138-142;[5 p.]. Available from: http://www.usal.es/~revistamedicinacine/Volumen_2_1/n4/ing_4_pdf/med_lit_cine_ing.pdf
- 10.- Capeletti GL, Sabelli MJG, Tenutto MA. Can we teach better? The relationship between the cinema and teaching. J Med Mov. [serial on the Internet]. 2007 [cited 2007 September 28]; 3(3):87-91 [5 p.]. Available from: http://www.usal.es/~revistamedicinacine/Vol_3/3.3/ing3.3.pdf/educ_ing.pdf