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Eva Perón: Sexual Stereotypes, Seduction and Subversion

The most famous image of former Argentine First Lady Eva Perón, popularised by scurrilous gossip at home and internationally by the musical *Evita*, is that of an attractive, ambitious and calculating young woman who used her physical attractions to gain fame, wealth and power. The mirror image of this figure – and equally exaggerated – is the presentation of her, especially after her early death, as an ethereal, asexual ‘saint’ whose beatification has been formally sought. Neither of these images is true, and neither is as interesting as the real person behind them.

In May 2019, on the occasion of her centenary, Argentina’s General Confederation of Labour (CGT) presented a petition to Pope Francis asking him to consider the beatification of Eva Perón (Evita). This was followed up on October 30 by a formal petition to the archbishop of Buenos Aires (the diocese where she had died) asking him to begin the process of beatification: “now that her figure and works have reached a transcendent value for our people and for all the peoples of the world who thirst for justice, we ask that our church accompany popular sentiment and place her on the official altars for the happiness of our faithful and our saints.”¹ The petition cited Evita as one of Argentina’s “spiritual sources of nationality” and urged that the papacy of the Argentine Jorge Bergoglio “can light a path, if we are willing to follow the footsteps left by our best men and women.”

As unlikely as the petition might seem in the case of a woman who was widely perceived to have used sex as a means to power, it was not the first: within days of Evita’s death in July 1952, the newspaper vendors’ union in Argentina had first sought her canonisation. While the proposal was given little serious consideration at the time, the CGT may have felt by 2019 that an Argentine pope (one widely attributed to have strong Peronist sympathies) might offer a better path. And indeed, in 2017, Pope Francis had introduced

a new path to possible beatification and eventual canonisation that might be better suited to Evita's unique career, including as possible candidates those who "with the intention of following the Lord, driven by charity, have heroically offered their own life for their neighbour, freely and voluntarily accepting a certain and premature death" – qualities which the petitioner must be able to demonstrate in each case.²

María Eva Ibarguren, also known as María Eva Duarte, Eva Duarte, Eva Perón and most commonly as Evita, had a remarkable and varied career during her brief life (1919-1952) and even beyond it, not least as sinner, saint, saviour, social worker and satanic instrument, depending on the point of view of the beholder. Above and beyond those rather stereotypical characterisations, she was the most powerful woman in Latin America during her lifetime (possibly still) and an original political figure who nonetheless embodied many far less original attributes commonly associated with women, including the temptress, the devoted wife, nurturing protector and the mother figure, despite having no children. Indeed, she was arguably not any of the characters she was claimed to be, while in part she had elements of all of them.

Regardless of whether Evita is considered a saint or a sinner, or any of the attributes in between, it is scarcely likely that she would have seen herself as unduly pious, recognising as she did that she was not a "candle-licker" and did not like to spend valuable time warming the seats of pews. Yet the later insistence on her ethereal image as a sort of Virgin mother is precisely the opposite side of the coin to her image as a whore or a trafficker of sexual favours – and equally implausible. Both images represent somewhat clichéd notions of womanhood, nowhere better represented than in classic tango lyrics, in which female characters are largely divided into saintly mothers and faithless, heartless women (frequently employed in cabarets) who had wronged the (male) singer, sometimes distracting him from the pure and faithful girl who would have transformed into another saintly mother had the singer not transgressed due to the wiles of the fallen woman.

Certainly for the notions of respectable society at the time, Evita's background was anything but the norm for a first lady of Argentina. One of five illegitimate children of a well-off (and married) rancher and his cook, Juan Duarte and Juana Ibarguren, she would grow up in poverty, raised by a formidable mother who kept food on the table by sewing and later by cooking for respectable bachelors working in the town of Junín – a biography that was far from unusual for many sectors of the population but unthinkable for the wife of a head of state. To make matters even worse, she was not content to

remain in Junín and seek to marry her way to respectability (as her sisters did), but went to Buenos Aires at the age of 15 with the ambition to become an actress. In keeping with the tango theme, *Evita* sustained the early version that she escaped Junín by seducing a tango singer, Agustín Magaldi, and persuading him to take her to Buenos Aires. This version is unproved and likely untrue – abetted by the fact that Magaldi was dead before Eva became well-known and thus unable to confirm or deny it – but served the purpose of underscoring the supposedly sordid means of her departure.



Figure 1: Eva as a young actress around 1943.



Figure 2: Eva as a young starlet posing in a bathing suit.

Perhaps even more surprisingly (and distressingly to some), Eva succeeded in her ambitions to no small degree, gaining small roles on stage and in films and becoming a well-known actress in radio soap operas, yet the rumours as to how she gained those roles proliferated and became more exaggerated as it became clear that she had formed a sentimental relationship with the strongman of the 1943-1946 military government, Colonel Juan Domingo Perón, a man widely seen (and feared) as the next president.

There can be little question that some of those rumours were not without foundation. The casting couch was ubiquitous in Buenos Aires in the 1930s, as elsewhere, and Evita was a pretty but seemingly unexceptional girl with limited talent and no powerful contacts. Many of her successes were without

doubt attributable to sexual favours or on occasion to more durable romances; after she became first lady, a British Embassy report in 1947 would repeat the story that she got work as an actress “as the result of the favours she bestowed on successive directors”.³ Yet this did not set her apart from other actresses, or indeed other working women, who generally faced pressure to “put out” from their male colleagues or employers. Indeed, it was widely expected that the duties of domestic servants (many of them, like Evita, very young women from the provinces) included sexual favours for the husbands and sons of the household; even years later respectable ladies would insist that “I want the maid to be healthy so my sons won’t look elsewhere”.⁴ If those extra duties led to pregnancy, of course, it was the maid who was to blame and would find herself on the street. Similarly, if Evita gained jobs through sexual favours, it was she, not the producer, who was seen as the predator. And, perhaps inevitably, as she became more successful, her “conquests” would become more important and in some cases more durable: although the element of sexual transaction persisted in at least some of her relationships, these shifted over the years from the casting couch to relationships with writers, magazine owners, soap opera sponsors and government officials. Like many others in many walks of life, this was the way to get on, as she saw it: “to succeed in life [...] you have to make friends with the one in charge.”⁵ Not an attitude that would shock today, it appalled polite society in the 1940s to think that a person who made a living from one unrespectable profession (acting) and possibly from an even older and less respectable one could occupy the role of first lady, a hitherto low profile but nevertheless decorous one.

Despite the fact that this story was not uncommon, in the case of Evita it would be transmogrified into something more by an opposition already alarmed by the rise of Perón and scandalised by the fact that he and Evita lived openly together without benefit of marriage during the early years of their relationship. This ‘black myth’ would claim that Evita had been a “common prostitute”, in the words of celebrated writer Jorge Luis Borges, and that her mother had run a “house of prostitution”, despite the fact that two of her sisters married prominent men who had been customers of her mother’s establishment and who would never have married girls even suspected of living and working in a brothel.⁶ As she became better known and more threatening politically, this would be exaggerated yet further; not only was she a predator rather than a victim, but she:

had a phenomenal gift for attracting the attention of influential men and making use of them [...] And once she had gained that attention she did not really let go of her victim but pursued him in person and by mail until the last drop of usefulness had been squeezed out of him.⁷

Even her radio colleague Pablo Raccioppi would comment years later that “I couldn’t say that Eva Duarte was a prostitute. But, among women who succeed, there is always a part of their life that remains obscure.”⁸

Much of this salacious and prurient gossip, if initially born out of genuine shock that a person of such unsuitable background could become first lady, was of course also useful in denigrating the figure of Perón, assumed to be a weak figure dominated by the sexual hold Evita maintained over him. The various versions of this narrative, which alternately define Evita as



Figure 3: A 1944 publicity photo of Eva at the peak of her radio success.

sexually insatiable and Perón as her helpless slave, or as sexually frigid and interested only in power, are contradictory but this did not deter opponents from enthusiastically bandying them about. Arguably it was perhaps inevitable that the caricature of Evita propounded by opponents was that of a whore, or ‘that woman’, as she was known. What is perhaps more surprising is how quickly her supporters would seek to turn the ‘black myth’ on its head with a ‘white myth’ of equally implausible purity – surely few people have made the journey from sinner to saint so rapidly or thoroughly.

As early as mid-1946, shortly after Perón took office as elected president, the CGT had taken up the notion of Evita as a quasi-religious figure, referring to her as Argentina’s ‘first Samaritan’, despite the fact that she had not yet begun in earnest the social work with which she would later be associated.

It is difficult to see quite why the CGT took this approach, apart from the probable recognition that, as the wife of the president, she could exercise influence and if she wished to be associated with the government's social outreach and work with the trade unions there was no harm, and possibly considerable benefit, in indulging her with some gentle flattery. This would, of course, be taken to new heights only a few years later, shortly before and following her death from cancer in 1952, at the age of only 33. The narrative that she had, in a Christlike way, sacrificed her life in her tireless work for her *descamisados* (shirtless ones) was not a difficult one to portray: her famously long hours, stretching well into the early hours of the morning, attending to petitioners at the Eva Perón Foundation, the monumental social projects carried out in her name and her refusal to consider treatment as her health deteriorated lent themselves to that narrative, in particular in a country where popular Catholic culture is widespread but doctrinal sophistication much less so. That narrative was doubtless sold by members of the government who saw it as beneficial to the government, to Perón and to themselves, but it was also taken up by the unions in particular, perhaps also for the purpose of self-exaltation. (The later claim that she was widely regarded as divine by devoted admirers who kept her photo on home altars is somewhat shakier. Although many people did so, it was very common for people to keep such pictures of departed relatives and to light candles or pray for their help from heaven in order to show they were still remembered lovingly or in the belief that they were now close to God, rather than actually believing that they were saints or had divine powers. From that point of view, the frequent homemade altars represented more an expression of the genuine affection she inspired, and the widespread perception that she was one of the family, rather than a belief that she was really a figure comparable to the Virgin Mary.) Perhaps by way of light relief, the propaganda also defined her at times as a 'good fairy', despite the fact that fairies get short shrift from the Catholic Church.

Even before Evita's death, when the physical signs of her illness were painfully apparent, the race was on among officials to load her down with quasi-religious titles and semi-divine properties (She herself was prone to make similar comparisons between Perón and the Holy Trinity, with observations such as "Perón is the face of God in the darkness", which may also have been a conscious attempt at self-glorification as his messenger).⁹ On her 33rd birthday, less than three months before her death, she was awarded the title Spiritual Leader of the Nation, one which both suggested martyrdom and also the encroachment of the state on the territory of the Catholic Church,



Figure 4: An iconic official portrait of Eva Perón from around 1950.



Figure 5: A poster picturing Evita after her death as the "refuge of the humble".

which in theory was the sole authority in spiritual matters. Following her death on July 26, 1952, the tributes and titles accumulated, including 'the martyr of labour', 'the standard-bearer of the suffering', 'the guiding angel of the Fatherland'. "For us she was like a star of Bethlehem.... She died to save us. Like Christ."¹⁰ Formal petitions for her canonisation came from various quarters including the CGT, prompting Evita's influential confessor, the Jesuit Hernán Benítez (himself never one to lose an opportunity), to observe that "the CGT splendidly began the history of recovering the labouring world for Christ."¹¹

All of this is indeed exaggerated – as exaggerated as the caricature of the younger Eva as a sexual dominatrix. Yet here too some seeds of truth can be found, which point to the fact that Evita in some ways represented traditional women's roles and stereotypes, but did so in a novel and subversive fashion.

Among the other things she was not (though perhaps she was in some senses) was a feminist in any traditional sense of the word. Although she would begin speaking in favour of women's suffrage not long after becoming first lady, and the law granting the women's vote in September 1947 was symbolically presented to her, in fact the question of women's suffrage long pre-dated her limited involvement. It was the result of decades of struggle

by traditional feminists – in the main, professional women with ties to the Socialist party, which set them apart from the more ordinary population which Evita successfully represented – who on the whole resented receiving the vote from the Perón government and the fact that it was credited to a first lady whose involvement in the struggle had been limited at best. Evita herself was somewhat dismissive of feminism, saying in her ghost written autobiography that “I wasn’t an old spinster, or ugly enough to occupy that kind of role’ and describing the feminist movement as ‘resentful women’.”¹² Even among those who credited Evita with the women’s vote, many clearly recognised that she was no feminist: “Perón was God, you had to be with Perón and she was his shadow. A feminist woman doesn’t talk like that.”¹³

In fact, Evita was a true believer in the value of traditional roles for women, and sought to espouse them, despite the obvious fact that as a childless career woman who took on a pioneering public role she was far from a traditional figure. Yet she would consistently cast herself in the role of sister, wife and mother; as early as 1944, when she began presenting radio propaganda on behalf of Perón and the de facto government’s social programme, her speeches were larded with phrases such as “I am a woman like you, mothers, wives, girlfriends or sisters...” and as first lady they continued to stress her ‘motherly’ role seeking to bring comfort and hope to humble households.¹⁴ Indeed, the kind of help and support she offered also tended to reinforce traditional women’s roles: the Women’s Peronist Party (*Partido Peronista Femenino*, PPF), launched in 1949, offered not only political education at its local branches, but also courses in sewing, hairdressing, cooking and secretarial skills, while the Eva Perón Foundation famously distributed thousands of sewing machines as well as other types of aid. Yet in some respects these initiatives did represent an element of feminism, or at least of enabling. While Evita shared the wide prejudice in favour of stay-at-home housewives and traditional families, her own life experience had taught her that this option was not available or appealing to all women. Her mother’s efforts to raise five children alone, first through sewing and then through cooking, made her all too well aware that women needed some guarantee of economic independence which could spring from such skills (as well as reducing household spending by making clothes or cutting hair at home.)

The types of development espoused by the Eva Perón Foundation also tended to shore up occupations traditionally seen as female-dominated, not least through the construction of hundreds of educational establishments and the setting up of a nursing school, as well as residences such as a Home

for Employed Women designed to provide a place of safety and comfort for working women alone in the city. The Foundation itself employed many social workers (primarily women) as well as teachers and nurses, and even sent the nurses it had trained abroad to help in crises elsewhere. If these activities arguably did not greatly broaden the range of employments usually deemed suitable for women, they expanded their scope and their public visibility, bringing women increasingly into the public sphere.

The PPF, despite its evident function of supporting its founder and her husband, also brought women into the political sphere in a way never before envisaged in Latin America. One of Evita's early political initiatives was a "national census of women Peronists", for which she appointed census delegates to oversee the process across the country; the young women she chose, who designated hundreds of sub-delegates of their own, and the most dedicated would occupy key roles within the PPF (although like Evita they would struggle with criticism of their unorthodox role - "they said we were whores because we did politics").¹⁵ In the 1951 general elections, women not only voted for the first time, but six women candidates for the Peronist Party entered the Senate and twenty-three entered the Lower House, with a further eighty women elected to provincial legislatures. One of those women deputies would later say that Evita "introduced women to politics, ... elevated their role as mothers and wives to political life on a par with men".¹⁶

Despite her unorthodox career, Evita could in many respects have been said to have achieved power through traditional means (first through sexual favours and then by marrying a powerful man) and to have used it to provide assistance in traditional ways, building up employment in "women's jobs" such as nursing and teaching and bolstering working women through training in and access to more humble occupations such as sewing. Her own glamour also served as a model for working women - the crowning of the "Queen of Labour" on May Day every year and the publication in party magazines of tips on personal and home improvement sought to underscore the fact that working women could be just as attractive as their social superiors, as well as competent members of the labour force. Though not a feminist (and never willing to brook competition among her female collaborators) she attained unparalleled power and understood how to use it to benefit women in traditional ways that nevertheless spilled over into the radical and the novel, such as the PPF. The characterisation of her as either a whore or a Madonna speaks to traditional *machista* stereotypes rather than the reality of her persona, which incorporated both significant virtues and vices.

(By definition, the stereotypes of either the fallen woman or the Madonna are inherently dependent on male authority figures; despite her constant language deifying Perón, Eva was not.) Those stereotypes, conveniently, also allowed opponents to denigrate Perón as a weak character dominated by his stronger wife, who could then be decried as “masculine” – or, alternatively, as a calculating figure who exploited his wife in her final illness.

With a few possible exceptions such as Eleanor Roosevelt (who also faced strong and often cruel criticisms of both her person and her public role), Evita was a pioneer in creating a role for women in the public sphere that went far beyond anything seen up until that time, certainly in Latin America. The fact that her public role was not something traditionally associated with women lent it a masculine element however persistent the efforts to install maternal, deviant or saintly narratives. If her legacy has created something of a mould for women in politics that has yet to be entirely broken in Argentina, it also expanded the acceptance of women in roles of political and social responsibility. No feminist (as many critics have pointed out, a feminist could scarcely have so insistently belittled her own role beside that of her husband, or credited him with giving her dignity), she was a more accessible icon for ordinary women than the upper-class intellectual feminists who had gone before, giving her a wider resonance they may have lacked. And while both Perón and Eva have been accused of being authoritarian or indeed fascist, she was in no way conventional or conservative, making her an unappealing figure for the right in general. She remains in some ways a controversial and contradictory figure, worthy of both criticism and praise and continuing to embody the concept that those in power have a duty to improve the lives of others, even if opinions over how that should be done may differ. To a great degree she created the role of the political woman in Latin America, a public figure who was neither poor and defenceless nor rich and aristocratic. While the ‘saint and sinner’ extremes have to a degree faded in an increasingly non-traditional society, her image as a powerful woman committed to her convictions remains.

Notes

1. Press release from the General Confederation of Labour, 31 October 2019.
2. Quoted in InfoBAE, 31 October 2019.
3. Secret report from the British Embassy to the Foreign Office dated 7 March 1947, in FO 118/755. National Archives Kew.
4. J.M. Bergoglio, *Biblia: diálogo vigente*, (Editorial Planeta, Buenos Aires, 2013), 316.
5. Quoted in J. Hedges, *Evita: The Life of Eva Perón*, (I B Tauris London, 2016), 40.
6. Quoted *ibid*, 23.
7. M. Main, *The Woman with the Whip*, (Corgi Books London, 1996), 40.
8. Quoted in Borroni and Vacca, *La vida de Eva Perón*, (Editorial Galerna, Buenos Aires, 1970), 90.
9. Quoted in J. Hedges, *Argentina: A Modern History*, (I B Tauris London, 2011), 131.
10. *Democracia*, 30 July 1952.
11. H. Benítez, 'Eva Perón', *Revista de la Universidad de Buenos Aires*, July-September 1952, 20-1.
12. E. Perón, *La razón de mi vida*, (Ediciones Peuser, Buenos Aires, 1951), 202.
13. Quoted in L. Lardone, 20:25, *Quince mujeres hablan de Eva Perón*, 848 of 2160. Kindle edition, 1 July 2012.
14. Quoted in J. Hedges, *Evita*, 81.
15. Quoted in C. Barry, *Evita Capitana: El Partido Peronista Femenino 1949-1959*, (Eduntref, Buenos Aires, 2014), 171.
16. A.C. Macri, *Mi biografía política*, (Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Históricas Eva Perón, Buenos Aires, 2006), 9.