LIEUTENANT NUN

MEMOIR OF A BASQUE TRANSVESTITE IN THE NEW WORLD

Catalina de Erauso

Translated from the Spanish by
Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto

Foreword by Marjorie Garber

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FOREWORD

The Marvel of Peru

Another world was searched through oceans new
To find the *Marvel of Peru*;
And yet these rarities might be allowed
To man, that sovereign thing and proud,
Had he not dealt between the bark and tree,
Forbidden mixtures there to see.

—ANDREW MARVELL,
"The Mower Against Gardens" (1681)

How *can we* assess the erotic, social, and political effects of cross-dressing at a remove of almost four centuries, in the context of a culture very different from our own, and as described in a Spanish-language text? The short answer, of course, is that we can't. In the fascinating and fantastic adventures of the Lieutenant Nun doña Catalina de Erauso, who cross-dressed her way out of a Spanish convent and into the New World, what we read, what we find, is a version of ourselves.

When Catalina de Erauso fights duels, steals money, leads soldiers into battle, rescues a woman in distress, evades the marriage plans of hopeful widows and their daughters, and marches across league upon league of uncharted Peruvian terrain, it is tempting to see in her tale an allegory of early modern woman's emergent subjectivity. When, acting as a

"second" for a friend whose honor has been insulted, she kills her brother unknowingly and inadvertently, it seems possible to see her as a version of Shakespeare's Viola in *Twelfth Night*, stepping into the shoes—and the clothing—of the brother she believes is dead. (It is a happy coincidence that her hometown in Spain is San Sebastian, the name of Viola's lost brother.) When Catalina flirts with two young women, "frolicking" and "teasing," it might seem intriguing to read this as lesbianism *avant la lettre*, an instance of female homosexuality or, at the very least, love play between women. Yet all these readings are allegorical—that is to say, they are readings of her story as a story *about something else*, readings that offer her life—as indeed saints' and others' lives have been offered in the literary annals of her time and ours—as *exempla*, as indications of deeper or higher truths.

Such modern readings are no more allegorical, it is perhaps needless to say, than the readings offered within the text itself: the search for the king on Holy Thursday that culminates in his discovery on Easter, the revelation that after all her adventuring (and horseback-riding) the Lieutenant Nun remains *virgo intacta*, the close-calls (or clothes-calls? or close-shaves?) in which she encounters first her father, then her mother, shortly after her cross-dressed flight from the confines of the convent, and neither parent recognizes her. She is already someone else. As a story about emergent subjectivity, male or female, early modern or postmodern, Catalina de Erauso's narrative is a literal description of self-fashioning, in which, quite literally, clothes make the man.

We may ourselves mistake subject for object, or discourse for subjectivity, when we regard Catalina's "self" as stable, and her costumes and roles as shifting. One thing that is very striking about this memoir is the materiality of clothing, and

its value. Recall that this is a time period far removed from the mass production of garments and the availability of ready-to-wear. Clothing was wealth, and even identity. Actors in the theater wore noblemen's hand-me-downs, and were criticized for social-climbing, a transvestism of rank or status as well as of gender. Catalina's payment from benefactors and employers is frequently a suit of clothes, and she describes these gifts with distinct pleasure and gratitude. They help to transform her, again quite literally, into another person, with a new status as well as a new gender. Clothes offer sensuous pleasure, wealth, status, and social roles.

Leaving the convent Catalina says she "shook off my veil" and spent three days and nights (the Christological interval is perhaps not inadvertent) re-making herself anew, cutting a pair of breeches from her blue woollen bodice, a doublet and hose from her green petticoat. Not long after this transformation, she describes herself finding work "as a page" and resembling "a well-dressed young bachelor."

Pages are often described in Renaissance literature as beautiful young boys who looked (almost) like girls, and could be regarded as sexual partners for men as well as women. Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* correctly "reads" Viola's "femininity" when she is dressed as the boy Cesario, though he doesn't realize what he sees. A male page in *The Taming of the Shrew* is dressed in women's clothes and pretends to be the wife of the drunken tinker, Christopher Sly. The fantastical Spaniard Don Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost* rehearses his love-discourse with a page in the court of Navarre. In the Forest of Arden Rosalind chooses as her alias "no worse a name than Jove's own page" (*As You Like It* 1.3.124), and the name she adopts is "Ganymede," a slang term in the period for "boy lover" or "male prostitute." Since

on the English public stage during the Renaissance female parts were played by boy actors, a complex eroticism attends these impersonations. Rosalind as Ganymede at the height of the plot's foolery is a boy (actor) playing a girl playing a boy playing a girl. "Madam, undress you, and come now to bed," says Christopher Sly to the page he thinks is his wife, only reluctantly agreeing, at the last minute, to substitute a stage-play for immediate love play "in despite of the flesh and the blood."

In the "real life" situations of Renaissance courtesans and prostitutes, who—for example, in Venice—often dressed as boys, the *frisson* of gender undecidability might be reversed, with provocative results for the flesh and the blood. "You talk like a fair lady and act like a pageboy," wrote the sixteenth-century author Pietro Aretino approvingly to a courtesan in the Italian town of Pistoia. Masculine clothing was stylish not only in Renaissance Italy but also in England and in France, where in the sixteenth century no less a personage than Marguerite de Navarre was described as both handsomely and bewilderingly attired: "You cannot tell whether she is male or female. She could just as well be a charming boy as the beautiful lady that she is."[1]

In a later time period equally titillated by gender crossover, Lady Caroline Lamb sat for her portrait in the costume of a page, and appeared in that guise at the door of her lover, the romantic poet Lord Byron. "He was a fair-faced delicate boy of thirteen or fourteen years old, whom one might have taken for the lady herself,"[2] a visitor reported of the cheeky young "page." In an instance of literature accompanying if not imi-

1. Pierre de Brantome, *La vie des dames galantes* (Paris).

2. R. C. Dallas, *Correspondence of Lord Byron with a Friend* (Paris: Galignani, 1825), pp. 41–42.

tating life, Byron's poem *Lara* centers on a male page who is revealed to be a girl, with a hand "So femininely white it might bespeak/Another sex."

The cultural and erotic fascination with pages, their borderline genders and sexualities (together with the literary and sexual fantasy of "turning the page"), continued on through the early twentieth century. In the 1920s lesbian poet Renée Vivien, dressed as a page, posed for a photograph with her lover Natalie Barney. Pageboy haircuts were the standard feminine style for conventional women in the 1950s (the same period that favored so-called "little boy" leg-styles on women's tailored bathing suits). Where the page was once a young man who could be taken for a young woman, he/she had become, by the early part of this century, a young woman who resembled an elegant if somewhat anachronistic young man.

But in the Catholic Spain of the seventeenth century the cross-dressed woman might have other valences and associations besides, or instead of, erotic ones. While England banned women from the stage, permitted transvestite actors, and feared that cross-dressing might provoke homosexual desire, Spain allowed women on the stage, rejected the use of transvestite boy players, and punished homosexuality with death. Female cross-dressing seems to have been viewed with particular concern, since it was banned a number of times—for example, in 1600, 1608, 1615, and 1641. (The ban, obviously, proved ineffective, since it needed so frequently to be renewed.)[3] Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* (*Life*

3. Ursula K. Heise, "Transvestism and the Stage Controversy in Spain and England, 1580–1680," *Theatre Journal* 44.3 (October 1992), p. 357. Stephen Orgel, "Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?" in *Displacing Homophobia*, ed. Ronald R. Butters, John M. Clum, and Michael Moon, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88.1 (Winter 1989), p. 28.

Is a Dream), a play dated around 1636, features a cross-dressed woman determined to avenge her own honor, in the tradition of *pundonor*. "As a man I come to serve you bravely / Both with my person and my steel," Rosaura tells the prince to whom she has revealed her true identity. "If you today should woo me as a woman / Then I should have to kill you as a man would / In honourable service of my honour."[4] The medieval Catholic example of Joan of Arc, the cross-dressed soldier and saint tried for transvestism by the Inquisition, is never invoked in the memoir, nor is the more distant but equally pertinent example of Saint Uncumber or Wilgefortis, known as Librada in Spain, the "redeemer of women from men," of whom it is said that, to protect her virgin status, she prayed for Christ's help and was immediately adorned with a moustache and beard; her intended husband, the pagan king of Sicily, declined to marry her but her father had her crucified. Where Joan and Librada both differ signally from Catalina de Erauso, of course, is that neither ever tried to pass as a man.

In the course of her long career as an itinerant soldier of fortune, Catalina is once stripped and placed on the rack, and on several other occasions her wounds are tended by benevolent strangers. Why does she never express a fear of detection? Wouldn't the stripping reveal aspects of her female anatomy, her woman's body? For a modern reader, much of the suspense initially inheres in the constant risk that her "secret" will be discovered. But these are questions she does not explore and worries she does not manifest. (The episode on the rack seems to have produced no disquieting revelation,

4. Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Life is a Dream*, trans. Roy Campbell, in *Six Spanish Plays*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), act 3, ll. 490–94.

since on receiving a note urging clemency the justice instructs the torturers to "take the lad down.") But Catalina de Erauso is much more concerned about self-exposure with people she *knows*: her mother, her father, her brother. It is these persons alone who can return her to an identity she has by now set aside, or moved beyond.

And what about her own erotic life? She says virtually nothing about it. From a modern perspective gender disguise looks to many readers like a transparent narrative about sexuality and eroticism. But we have in the memoir no articulation of longing, no sense of entrapment in gender disguise, no relief at avoiding male attentions, no sustained temptation to engage in courtship or to take a lover or a mate. Catalina's story does not seem to be about "sex," at least as she tells it. No man ever suspects Catalina's female identity, or makes a pass at her either as a man or as a woman. The threat of marriage with a half-breed widow's daughter or an eager churchman's niece precipitates a little crisis, but it is only a crisis in *narrative*. "I saddled up and vanished." The flirtatious and overly familiar whores at the memoir's end are dismissed out of hand as "harlots" whose honor only a fool would defend. As she tells it, hers is the story of a loner who enjoys camaraderie with men, an adventurer who spends most of her peripatetic career in the New World, yet whose proudest claim to identity is not as a man or a woman but rather as a "Spaniard."

In England the Puritan pamphleteer William Prynne was one of many who inveighed against cross-dressing on the stage as a transgression sure to produce immoral desire. During his trial for sedition in the 1630s, Prynne's disparaging view of contemporary hairdressing styles was read aloud to the court.

Identifiable gender markings, he had complained, were perversely undone by contemporary fashion. Men curled their long hair, while "our Englishe gentle-women, as yf they all intended to turn men outright, and weare the breeches, or to be Popish nunnes, are now growne soe farr past shame, past modesty, grace, and nature, as to clipp their hayre like men, with lockes and foretoppes." Cutting their hair, Englishwomen became—or "intended to turn"—either "men" or "nuns." In either case, the strongly anti-Catholic Prynne maintained, they were behaving against nature.

Yet surprisingly, in the case of the Lieutenant Nun, who becomes *both* a "man" *and* a "nun" in the course of her adventures, no strong sense of moral outrage is expressed by those who learn her secret, no sense that she is "unnatural" or behaving "against nature." In Seville, she became a celebrity. Rather than cross-dressing, the sins for which she needs absolution are more likely to be fighting, brawling, gambling, and murder.

In my book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (HarperCollins, 1993), I describe the literary and cultural phenomenon I call a "category crisis" and a related manifestation I call the "transvestite effect." A category crisis is a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, permitting border crossings from one apparently distinct category to another. What seems like a binary opposition, a clear choice between opposites that define cultural boundaries, is revealed to be not only a construct but also—more disturbingly—a construct that no longer works to contain and delimit meaning. Some examples pertinent to Catalina's story might include male/female, black/white, gay/straight, Christian/Indian, Christian/cannibal, Old World/

New World, master/servant, master/slave. The appearance of a transvestite figure in a text, I suggest—whether that "text" be an artifact of fiction, history, narrative, or visual culture—was almost invariably a sign of a category crisis *elsewhere*: not, or not only, in the realms of gender and sexuality, but also, and equally importantly, in registers like politics, economics, history, and literary genre. Since from the point of view of a modern, twentieth-century readership gender and sexuality are often regarded as a kind of "ground" of identity and identity-formation, these transvestite figures mark the narratives in which they appear as narratives of a world under conceptual stress. And the more extraneous the fact of cross-dressing appears to be to the story the text seems to be telling, the more critical the "crisis" of category, the more blurred the boundary that is being, apparently, policed.

After Catalina is nursed to health by a lady she describes as a "half-breed" in Tucumán," the daughter of a Spaniard and an Indian woman, a widow and a good woman," the stage is set for a category crisis. Indeed, she is remanded into the good woman's care by rescuers whose initial identity she doubts—"were they cannibals or Christians?" The woman's desire to have this apparently eligible young bachelor marry her daughter founders, not only on the bachelor's "real" gender identity but also on questions of race and beauty. It is perfectly possible that among the non-narrated escapades of the memoir (Catalina will say much later that "a few other things happened to me . . . but since they don't add up to much I omit them from these pages") is, or rather might have been, some evidence of (homo)sexual desire. But as it stands the resistance to marriage is more strongly marked by aversions of class, race, and nobility than by gender or sexuality. The

transvestite effect is powerful in part because it seems both "the point" of the story and somehow something "beside the point."

Catalina de Erauso's Basque identity is another such border crossing. She and her family are proud that they come from the Basque country, a region on the borderline between Spain and France with its own distinct language and culture. More than once in the New World her escape from a tight spot is facilitated by a fellow Basquero. The disruptive gender identities (marked in the text by "male" and "female" pronouns) and geographical wandering between Spain and Peru are undertaken by a figure already exceptional and transgressive, whose nationality is as complex as her personal history.

Tensions between Old and New World, between Indians and "Spaniards," between purebreds and "half-breeds," and between the merchant class and the nobility put under increasing pressure by the *encomienda* system of settlement and fealty could be said to have "produced" a triumphant story of transvestite transgression—or, at least, to have produced a sympathetic audience for such a tale. "News of this event [her confession] had spread far and wide, and it was a source of amazement to the people who had known me before, and to those who had only heard of my exploits in the Indies, and to those who were hearing of them for the first time." Catalina's celebrity was not only a sign of personal distinction; it was, as she tells it, an effect of paradox, risk, and excess. If, as Michele Stepto has said in the introduction to Catalina's memoirs, "in Peru, as everywhere else in the Americas, abundance tended to dissolve ancient links between power and hereditary status," this was the very kind of category crisis for which a transvestite heroine (and, moreover, one both impeccably virginal and commendably patriotic) was emblematically ideal, a "marvel of Peru."

The poem by Andrew Marvell quoted at the beginning of this foreword is spoken by a mower who deplores the growing seventeenth-century taste in gardening, the desire to alter and "improve" on nature by grafting ("forbidden mixtures") and by importing flowers from the New World. (The "Marvel of Peru" [*mirabilis jalapa*], also known as "Beauty-in-the-Night" and "four-o'clock," a staple of modern gardens, was at the time an exotic flower.) This was a major topos in both seventeenth-century gardening and seventeenth-century poetry (Shakespeare's Perdita has a quarrel with the disguised King Polixenes along the same lines in *The Winter's Tale*), and it was often taken, as the "garden" figure suggests, as a description of both an ideal and a desecrated Eden, with serious political implications.

In what are perhaps the best-known lines of the poem, the mower laments the ambition of "luxurious man":

> No plant now knew the stock from which it came;
> He grafts upon the wild the tame,
> That the uncertain and adulterate fruit
> Might put the palate in dispute.
> His green seraglio has its eunuchs, too,
> Lest any tyrant him outdo;
> And in the cherry he does Nature vex,
> To procreate without a sex.

The mower's conservative resistance to "forbidden mixtures" and "uncertain and adulterate fruit" (precisely the titillating transgressions that excited modern garden enthusiasts of the period) may be pertinently juxtaposed to the vogue

for cross-dressing and cross-dressing narratives, on the stage, in the streets, and in the annals of popular culture. Were "forbidden mixtures" and the intergrafting of "wild" and "tame" the end of civilization as the old garden knew and embodied it, or the beginning of a brilliant and tumultuous new future?

The anxieties of "adultery," the power of the "eunuch," and the dark fantasy of procreation without a sex appear in numerous undercover forms in *Lieutenant Nun*, all translated into figures for economic as well as erotic violation. The chief insult is "cuckold"; the scenario for a fight is the gaming table. Questions of property rather than propriety are paramount. Catalina, miraculously herself still a virgin, eluding the claims of her "natural" parents and family, confounds the "forbidden mixtures" of gender, sexuality, class, and nation to emerge as a sign of Spain's—and Catholicism's—primacy in a changing and mysterious world. No wonder the king was willing to grant her a pension, and the Pope a dispensation.

A study of female transvestism in early modern Europe by Dutch scholars Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van der Pol records the stage popularity of plays about "the Spaniard Catalina de Erauso and the Englishwoman Mary Frith." As they note, "female soldiers had a propaganda value: the monarch could show to the world that even women rallied under his banners," and the example they cite is that of Catalina de Erauso, who lived "a life as a conquistador in South America, where she not only had not behaved like a lady, but in fact not like a gentleman either."[5] Not like a lady and not like a gentleman:

5. Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van der Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 95–96.

as this formulation suggests, gendered behavior in what likes to think of itself as polite society is not "natural," but rather a series of adaptive roles. Catalina, quite literally neither the one thing nor the other, carved out for herself the freedom to transgress, and—like the most successful gender-benders of today's popular culture and the arts—was rewarded for her temerity, however briefly, with fame and money.

New World narratives that engage the question of cross-dressing tend to locate it within the practice of the Indians rather than the Spanish. "Cross-dressed bodies," writes Jonathan Goldberg (analyzing an early account of Balboa's visit to an Indian king whose brother and other young male courtiers were said to be dressed in "womens apparell"), "are the locus of identity and difference, a site for crossings between Spanish and Indians, and for divisions between and among them."[6] In the case of Catalina de Erauso, however, the cross-dresser is female, not male, virile, not effeminate, Spanish, not Indian, and virginal, not dissolute.

Accounts of women who dressed as men have proven to be engaging reading for a late twentieth-century public interested in, even obsessed with, the fluidity (and limits) of its own gender and erotic roles. Julia Wheelright's 1989 *Amazons and Military Maids*, for example, contained accounts of numerous English, Irish, American, and Russian women who "dressed as men in pursuit of life, liberty and happiness" and served as soldiers, sailors, and pirates from the eighteenth century to the twentieth, among them Hannah Snell, who became James Gray, a British soldier and sailor in the eighteenth

6. Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 184.

century; Christian Davies, an Irish publican turned soldier; Maria Bochkareva, the leader of the Russian Women's Battalion of Death; Deborah Sampson, who fought during the American Revolution disguised as Robert Shurtleff; Angélique Brulon, a soldier in Napoleon's infantry; and Valerie Arkell-Smith, otherwise known as Colonel Barker. Mary Fleming Zurin's translation of the journals of a Russian officer in the Napoleonic wars, published in 1988 under the title *The Cavalry Maiden*, chronicled the story of Nadezhda Durova, a cross-dressed hussar officer who served in the cavalry for ten years as "Aleksandr Andrevich Aleksandrov." In her hussar role Durova confesses herself "shy" before women and the butt of jokes from the wives and daughters of fellow officers, who "never miss a chance to make me blush by calling me *hussar miss* as a joke"—not comprehending that their "joke" is a kind of truth. "A woman has only to look fixedly at me to start me blushing in confusion," she writes. "I feel as if she sees right through me and guesses my secret from my appearance alone."[7] Like Catalina at the end of her story, Nadezhda was known in her female identity to the monarch, in this case Czar Alexander I of Russia, who granted her the commission.

Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto have enterprisingly opted to use the idiom of the American West in rendering Catalina's story, reminding the reader that "Peru was on the western frontier of Spain's New World empire." They cite Huck Finn as a rhetorical model. Another obvious figure from the annals of "the West" might be the legendary cross-dressed American frontierswoman Calamity Jane, also known as

7. Nadezhda Durova, *The Cavalry Maiden*, trans. Mary Fleming Zurin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 78.

Martha Jane Burke, whose raucous history in Deadwood, South Dakota, was entwined with that of Wild Bill Hickok. An even closer analogue, however—since Calamity Jane married and had a subsequent public career as a woman in Wild West shows—might be the kind of cross-dressed Western pioneer who lived as a man, like the eponymous hero/heroine of the 1993 film *The Ballad of Little Jo*.

Jo (played by Suzy Amis) escapes from her repressive Eastern family and a romance gone awry, donning men's clothes as a way of avoiding men's advances as she works her way toward a rough-and-tumble mining town in the West. Achieving acceptance as a man in a man's world, Jo also finds love and sexuality in a secret relationship with a Chinese-American man she takes on as a hired hand; his marginal status (Asian, itinerant, subservient) balances her own, and provides the set of category crises out of which the film crafts its possibility for boundary-breaking romance. As so often in such stories her "real" gender identity is publicly disclosed only after her death, when the undertaker comes to lay out the body.

The Ballad of Little Jo, directed by a woman, Maggie Greenwald, is ultimately a tale of female heterosexual independence, with far more in the way of "love story" than *Lieutenant Nun*. But another signature story of the American West with a similar dénouement (the autopsy surgeon discovers the female body) tells a slightly different tale. The story is that of Jack Bee Garland, writer, newspaperman, and social worker, who was identified on his death in 1936 as "the long-vanished" Elvira Virginia Mugarrieta, daughter of San Francisco's first Mexican consul, granddaughter of a Louisiana Supreme Court Justice. "She wanted to go to the Philippines in 1899 to see the Spanish-American war front there," reported Elvira's sister. "She couldn't go as a woman, so . . .

she put on men's clothes, went over on an army transport with a Colorado regiment, and served as a field hospital worker."[8] After her death—described with unconscious wit by the *Oakland Tribune* as "her passing"—reporters discovered that Jack Bee Garland had had another life in the 1890s as a woman called Babe Bean, an eccentric denizen of Stockton's high society, who dressed in male clothing but made no secret of her gender, and was "accompanied by a male companion." Interrogated by the Stockton police, Babe said of her male clothing, "It is my only protection; I do it because I am alone."[9]

Jack Bee's biographer, transgender activist Louis Sullivan, describes him as "a female-to-male transsexual, even though such luxuries as modern-day male hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgeries were not available options during his lifetime."[10] One can almost imagine such a sentence being written about Catalina de Erauso, who ended her life as the Mexican mule-driver Antonio de Erauso. But the degree of anachronistic dislocation involved in such a diagnosis—across centuries, cultures, and gaps in knowledge—should serve as a warning against any temptation to assimilate individual life-stories toward coherent master narratives. We read from where we are, and from our own cultural and historical position. All our reading is in a sense misreading or overreading. What I want to emphasize here is that such overdetermination is part of the pleasure of reading as well as part of its danger. *All* reading is *partial* in two senses—not *im*partial and not whole.

8. Louis Sullivan, *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1990), p. 9.
9. Ibid., p. 17.
10. Ibid., p. 3.

In this engrossing and elegantly translated memoir the reader is afforded a glimpse into a world almost unimaginably alien and estranging. Yet it is at the same time a world whose insistent if limited analogies to modern (and postmodern) experience are seductively present. The effect of the first-person memoir, even mediated through the translators' text, is disarmingly engaging and direct. If self-consciously "modern" categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and religion are all at work in this narrative—and they are—their mutual interplay is far from predictable. What emerges is a clear and complex voice telling a story that can be read at once as autobiography and pilgrimage, picaresque and memoir.

Ultimately the question of "gender" as a category of analysis within seventeenth-century Spanish and New World culture remains a space of negotiation rather than a set of knowable answers. We might compare it to the constant repetition in the memoir of the word "league." In almost every chapter Catalina records her travels: "I left Tucumán . . . and made my way to Potosí some five hundred and fifty leagues away"; "I had no choice but to leave La Plata, and I headed for Charcas some sixteen leagues off"; "they flung me and my two companions out on the Paita coast, a good hundred leagues from Lima." How long is a league? Land leagues of about 2.63 miles were used by the Spanish in early surveys of parts of the American Southwest, but the term "league" is extremely various and contingent in its definitions, ranging from 2.4 to 4.6 statute miles (3.9 to 7.4 kilometers) by some reckonings. In English-speaking countries the league is often equivalent to three statute miles; in ancient Rome it was 1,500 paces; in the eighteenth century a league was defined as the distance a cannon shot could be fired at enemy ships offshore. In a modern lexicon in which "league" has taken on some aspects of the

fantastic or the marvelous ("seven-league boots"), the league, a common Spanish measure, seems in Catalina's account of her progress both excessively precise and excessively general. Catalina's cross-dressing occupies, I want to suggest, the same double terrain of fact and fable. Its "truth" is both literal and allegorical. In *Lieutenant Nun*, Catalina de Erauso emerges as a figure at once male and female, enigmatic and familiar, resolute and endangered, abject and celebrated, elusive and recognizable—a figure, we might say, in a league of her own.

Marjorie Garber

INTRODUCTION

It is more than ten years now since an Argentine friend presented me with a photocopy of the 1918 edition of Catalina de Erauso's *La Historia de la Monja Alférez*, but I remember her description of the book as if it were yesterday. "It's about a nun who fled the convent," she said, "and lived the life of a bandit for many years, posing as a man, until one day she was apprehended at a crossroads and given a choice—she could return to the convent and set down her confession in writing, or she could be tried and hanged for her crimes. She chose to confess, and this is the confession she wrote."

As I read *La Historia*, I looked in vain for the eloquent details of my friend's synopsis—the crossroads, the choice that was no choice at all, the confession, the resubmersion beneath the veil—delighted, but also perplexed, to discover in the book in hand the story of a woman who had lived freely, given the time and place, and more or less escaped the consequences. Later, as I learned more about the history of this woman, I understood that my friend's version belonged to the body of lore and legend that had developed around the figure of Catalina de Erauso, and that had taken on a vivid life of its own in the 150 years during which her memoir remained unpublished.

For centuries, the Spanish-speaking world has been fascinated by the story of the Basque girl with the quick temper who ran away from her convent dressed as a man and became La Monja Alférez, the Lieutenant Nun. To summarize the

highpoints of her life—as she herself set them down in her memoir—is to rehearse the tale of a picaro let loose on the New World: She traveled to the Americas in 1603, became a soldier, fought in the conquest of Chile. She enjoyed the attentions of other women, killed her brother in a duel, gambled and brawled her way through the mining towns of the Andean highlands. She killed and maimed, spent time in jail, and more time in the sanctuary of the Church. She claimed the privilege of nobility to escape torture, and proclaimed herself a heretic to escape hanging. When finally cornered, after twenty years of masking, she revealed her secret—she was not only a woman, but an intact virgin, a piece of news that, far from condemning her, brought her a brief celebrity in the Baroque world. In 1624, she returned to Europe, where she earned from the Spanish king a military pension, and from the pope permission to continue her life in men's clothing. Then, in 1630, she returned to the new world, and slipped from the pages of history.

Catalina de Erauso began life in the town of San Sebastian, on the northern coast of Spain, a middle child and the third daughter of a large and prosperous Basque family. She gives 1585 as the year of her birth, though records in San Sebastian indicate she was baptized in 1592. In either case, she was born into a Spain that was enjoying its first hundred years of American conquest, and extending that conquest further and further south along the western coast of South America, a Spain that had dedicated itself, its sons, its military and commercial activity to the harvest of riches in lands thousands of miles away. Whatever Catalina may have come to know in the years before she herself left for the Americas, she must have been keenly aware of there being another world, a "new"

world. Of those far shores, she must have heard countless stories.

Her father, Captain Miguel de Erauso, had probably served in the American colonies. Her older brother Miguel had been there since Catalina was two—"I had had news of him," she remembers. Three more brothers, Domingo, Francisco, and Martín, would follow him there, and all four would end their lives in South America. But while the Erauso sons went forth into the expanding world, a different future was unfolding for the Erauso daughters. Like other prosperous Basque families, the Erausos gave their sons to the conquest and their daughters to the convent, thus promoting the family prestige and protecting its honor. One by one, the girls entered the convent of San Sebastian the Elder, there to be reared and educated—for marriage if a likely match presented itself, for a nun's life if it did not.

Conventional marriage or the conventual life—these were the possibilities open to the Erauso daughters, among whom Mariana eventually married, while Mari Juana, Isabel, and Jacinta lived out their lives in the town convent. Catalina alone escaped, and in a way that tells us much about the freedom available to Spanish men of her class, and much about her own versatility. She refashioned her undergarments into a suit of men's clothes, cut her hair short, and walked out of San Sebastian. In the neighboring town of Vitoria, she presented herself as a young servant, and thereafter as a page to the king's secretary, as a mysterious young bachelor in her hometown, and finally as ship's boy to her unwitting uncle, in whose galleon she crossed the Atlantic. In Nombre de Dios, as her uncle readied his galleon for the return voyage to Spain, stowing the gold that was the fruit of

Spanish conquest, Catalina stole what she needed from him and jumped ship, setting out to make her way alone in the New World.

Everything in Catalina's memoir bespeaks a quick and enterprising nature, a spirited, often ungovernable temper, a love of action and travel. Given such qualities, it is no wonder that she chose to don men's clothing and follow her father and brothers to the Americas. But the Peruvian world she was to make her way in would, in many ways, have been utterly familiar to Catalina. Though unimaginably distant, it was nevertheless recognizably Spanish.

In 1603, when Catalina came to Peru, the Hispanicization of the region was an accomplished fact. The defeat of the Incan empire by Francisco Pizarro and his followers was not even three-quarters of a century old, yet the mechanisms whereby imperial Spain would subdue much of the region's Indian population and exploit its extraordinary natural riches were firmly in place. The major cities of present-day Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia—then all part of Greater Peru—had already been founded, many of them rising, like Quito and Cuzco, in places from which the Inca had held sway. The Catholic missionary orders had long been on the scene, proselytizing the crown's new Indian subjects and founding churches, schools, hospitals, monasteries, and convents, including the *grandes conventos* of Lima, like La Santísima Trinidad, where Catalina spent two and a half years before returning to Spain. A thriving merchant and artisan class, by now several generations old, was keeping Spanish Peruvians supplied with military equipment and the finest domestic luxuries their wealth could buy.

Above all, Spain's distinctive land-grant system had already carved up much of the inhabited landscape into nearly five hundred administrative units, or *encomiendas*. Under the *encomienda* system, the grantee received not land itself but the tribute of Indians residing within certain boundaries. In return for the promise to protect and Christianize his Indian *encomendados*, and to marry and take up residence in one of the Spanish Peruvian cities, the *encomendero* grew rich, often fabulously rich, from the tribute of his Indian workers. As the mineral wealth of the Andes began to be reckoned, and especially following the discovery of the great silver mountain of Potosí in 1545, a scant seven years after the Conquest, Indian tribute began to be exacted in the form of labor, with gangs of *mitayos* or conscripted Indian workers moved from one mining site to another. The wealth which Indian labor produced, in both mine and field, allowed the *encomendero* and his wife to enrich their families back home while, in the urban centers of Greater Peru, they maintained large households of relatives, retainers, servants, and African slaves, households where Spanish custom, language, and religious practice were the rule. Thus, the system whereby Andean riches were funneled back to Spain simultaneously insured the firm planting of Spanish culture in the far western reaches of South America, on shores no European had guessed at a mere eighty years before. By the time Catalina arrived there, the very name Peru had come to mean fabulous wealth. But the riches that drew people from all over the Spanish empire, and beyond, also made for the attenuation of age-old Spanish custom in the new kingdom. Practices evolved to keep scarce wealth in the hands of a stable few will not remain unchanged in a place where scarcity—of land, of the labor to work it, of precious metals—is hardly the order of the day. In Peru, as everywhere

else in the Americas, abundance tended to dissolve ancient links between power and hereditary status.

Moreover, many of Peru's early conquerors were men of plebeian roots, transformed by the reward of rich *encomiendas* into the governing elite of the new kingdom. By the same token, Spanish Peruvian women, vastly outnumbered by men in the early colonial period, often elevated their status considerably through marriage to newly made *encomenderos*, who were duty-bound to take Spanish wives. By old-world standards, this could make for a certain social topsy-turviness, the kind of disorder we catch a glimpse of in chapter 10, in the violent dispute between doña Francisca Marmolejo, high-born and well-connected, and doña Catalina de Chaves, whose plebeian name connects her to Francisco de Chaves, Pizarro's friend and one of the early conquerors. While the gift of *encomiendas* was soon expended, so that by the mid-sixteenth century few new ones were being granted, in the chaotic world of Peru every Spaniard who came afterward, even the humblest baker or foot soldier, could expect to improve his or her condition in ways impossible to those who stayed at home.

Like all rich frontiers, like the Old West, Peru drew adventurers of every stripe. The region was crammed with gamblers and other itinerant types who, because they had little or nothing at stake, were a constant threat to colonial order. From time to time the powers-that-were rounded some of them up, paid them 200 *pesos* each, and sent them off on expeditions—or *entradas*—meant to subdue distant Indian villages and take new land for Spain. More often than not, the *entradas* ended in disaster, most notoriously in the case of the 1560 Amazonian expedition of Pedro de Orsua and the Basquero Lope de Aguirre. But the practice was still in use in

1605, when Catalina, suddenly friendless and unemployed, accepted 280 *pesos* to fight in Chile. Although she distinguished herself in the Araucanian Wars of Chile, rising to the rank of second lieutenant, Catalina's service did not procure any immediate change in her status. Her hand-to-mouth existence as a soldier continued and, following the accidental killing of her brother, she took up full rank in the itinerant underclass.

Catalina's detailed portrait of this class of Spanish Peruvians challenges the heroic version of the Conquest, but it jibes well enough with first-hand accounts of life on the Spanish colonial frontier. In his "Anonymous Description of Peru," Pedro de León Portocarrero, a Portuguese Jew who resided in Lima between 1600 and 1615, describes a world of "riots, disturbances, and untoward events" that is clearly the Peru Catalina moved in. His comparison of the Spanish Peruvian cardsharp and soldier offers a portrait of Peruvian life strikingly similar to Catalina's own. Portocarrero begins with the cardsharps:

> poor but haughty fellows; they can't bite but they can bark loudly. With heads low they go about sniffing for prey; they have no desire to subordinate themselves, nor is there any reasoning with them. Individuals of that sort are called "soldiers," not because they really are soldiers, but because they go hither and yon with a pack of cards in their hands and lose no opportunity to gamble with anyone they come across. If, by chance, they run into a novice or tenderfoot who is not very bright or whose suspicious nature does not extend to the possibility of a stacked pack of cards, they cheat him out of his money and possessions; sometimes they even win his horse or mule from under him. They are

consummate tricksters whose only concern is to master the art of deception. . . .

A different and less numerous breed take to soldiering, since every year recruits are sent from Lima to Chile. This type is not so clever, nor so free and easy in the art of flattery, and they lack the means to wander from one region to another like tramps. Usually they are slightly more disposed to accept employment, especially in the exercise of arms, by which they can live off the king's bounty. This element marches off with banners flying to fight against the Araucanian Indians after receiving 200 *pesos* in Lima with which to buy clothes. In this way the country is rid of them and troops are available to make war on the indomitable Araucanians. Few ever return to Peru.[1]

Portocarrero's description of the fate that awaited those who joined the army of conquest suggests that Catalina knew what she was doing when she left off soldiering to become a gambler.

After twenty years of knocking about Peru, increasingly the object of the law's attentions, Catalina revealed her secret to the young bishop of Guamanga with whom she had taken sanctuary, the "saintly" friar don Agustín de Carvajal, before whom she remembers "feeling as if I might already be in the presence of God." Undoubtedly, she also felt herself in a tight spot, but whatever her intentions the effect was immediate. She became an overnight wonder, and a week later, when

1. "Anonymous Description of Peru," in *Colonial Travelers in Latin America*, ed. William C. Bryant (Newark, Delaware: Juan de la Cuesta, 1972), pp. 98–99.

the bishop escorted her to the convent of Santa Clara, they couldn't enter the church, so great were the crowds that had gathered to see La Monja Alférez.

Catalina spent three years in Peruvian convents while the status of her religious vows was investigated. "Once again I donned the veil," is how she puts it, and while this sounds ominous, the interlude cannot have been altogether unpleasurable, considering her decided preference for the company of other women. When word finally came from Spain that she had never taken her final vows and was therefore free to go, she took an emotional leave of her companions at La Santísima Trinidad and stopped in Guamanga on her way back to Spain to spend a week with the nuns of Santa Clara.

Back in Europe, Catalina was characteristically and perpetually on the move, now celebrated, now obscure, and as disaster-prone as ever. In 1625, she presented a petition to the king, asking that he reward her "for the worthiness of her deeds and for the singularity and prodigiousness of her life, mindful that she is the daughter of noble and illustrious parents who are principal citizens in the town of San Sebastián; and for the rectitude and rare purity in which she has lived and lives, to which many have borne testimony; for which she would be honored to receive a yearly stipend of seventy pesos apportioned in 22 quilates per month in the city of Cartagena de las Indias, and funds to travel there . . ."[2] Already she was thinking of returning to the New World. During this same year, in Rome, she was introduced to the writer Pedro del Valle, who described her in a letter to a friend: "Tall and powerfully built, and with a masculine air, she has no more

2. "Petition of Catalina de Erauso to the Spanish Crown, 1625," trans. Stephanie Merrim, *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts*, no. 43 (1990), p. 37.

breasts than a girl. She told me that she had used some sort of remedy to make them disappear. I believe it was a poultice given her by an Italian—it hurt a great deal, but the effect was very much to her liking. Her face is not ugly, but very worn with years. Her appearance is basically that of a eunuch, rather than a woman. She dresses as a man, in the Spanish style. She carries her sword as bravely as she does her life."[3]

Sometime between 1626 and 1630—that is, between the visit to Naples, which concludes her memoir, and her return to the Americas—she wrote down in manuscript or dictated to an amanuensis an account of her life. As one might expect from someone of her time and place, whose life overlapped with Cervantes' by thirty years, her account is firmly shaped by the Spanish picaresque tradition, which flourished in the century and a half following the Colombian discovery. And like the better known classics of this tradition—the anonymously authored *Lazarillo de Tormes*, Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache*, Cervantes' *Rinconete y Cortadillo* and *Don Quijote*, Quevedo's *Vida del Buscón*, as well as Defoe's *Moll Flanders*—Catalina's memoir forcefully reminds us that the picaresque is a creature of discovery and conquest, a new mode of storytelling brought to birth in a suddenly vast and changing world. In her autobiography, as in so many other accounts of the time, fictional and nonfictional, the hand-to-mouth life of the commoner replaces the chivalric doings of nobility, while the symbolic terrain and conventional moral action of medieval romance give way to the startling factuality of real places and people.

3. Cited by José María de Heredia in his introduction to the 1918 edition of *La Historia de la Monja Alférez*, ed. Joaquín María de Ferrer (Madrid: Tipografía Renovación, 1918), p. vii.

Catalina's story is long on action and travel, on facts, names, and enumeration, because those are what she craved as a child of her age, what she left the convent of San Sebastian to discover. It is short on observation and self-examination because those are activities of leisure and quiet, conditions she willingly abandoned along with her veil. This emphasis on action, even on the verb as such, challenges the contemporary reader as well as the translator who wishes to make her memoir accessible in the here and now. Three sequences may serve as guides, however, to understanding Catalina's life as she told it.

In the first chapter, as she recounts wandering about the Spanish peninsula in the guise of a young man, Catalina speaks of herself as one without volition or strategy, "carried off like a feather in the wind." When her father arrives in Valladolid in search of her, she quietly slips off to Bilbao—"When I heard the anguish in my father's voice," she remembers, "I backed off slowly . . ." But when, "with no more reason than that it suited me," she leaves a comfortable situation in Estella to return to her hometown of San Sebastian, she discovers there that not even her own mother now recognizes her. In her typical low key, Catalina seems to downplay the moment—"I went to hear mass at my old convent, the same mass my mother attended, and I saw that when she looked at me she did not recognize me"—but this is a dramatic turning point in her young life, after which her travels take direction. Up to this point, she has insisted on her own lack of volition, but now, by a familiar psychological ruse, she discovers in her mother's unknowing glance her warrant for freedom—a warrant she may have been seeking when she returned to San Sebastian—and before long she is on her way to Seville, the center of commercial activity for the Americas, and to its

port, Sanlúcar, and from there across the Atlantic to Punta de Araya.

This sequence suggests that Catalina was in some sense a good daughter, driven by a hunger for freedom but loathe to acknowledge, even to herself, what might well pain or disgrace her family. It seems clear that, for Catalina, to disguise herself as a man was to gain freedom from all daughterly responsibility, a freedom marked by her pious mother's failure to recognize her. On the subject of motivation, however, she is conspicuously silent, even evasive. The endless drama of inner life, so much a fixture of our present literature, is absent from her memoir, and we are left to infer, by a word here, a detail there, above all by the actions which shape her character, an ardent wish to escape the obligations of Spanish womanhood.

Elsewhere, and with equal circumspection, Catalina makes plain that the cost of that escape was a deep loss—of family, of community, of a sense of belonging. Her disguise made strangers of her own kin, who seem to crop up everywhere in the first chapter, and eventually drove her to kill her brother and to seek refuge time and again in the Church she had once fled. In the name of freedom, she lived a paradox and, as for so many citizens of the New World, her paradise of footloose anonymity threatened at every moment to become a boneyard of violence and disconnection—or worse, to seem altogether unpeopled.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the sequence of events in chapters 6 and 7, which deal with her brother Miguel and the aftermath of their fatal duel. When she first meets him in Concepción, Catalina's delight seems entirely genuine, and we are not surprised that she chooses to spend three years under his command, an unknown sister. But her disguise, as

well as her liking for her brother's mistress, eventually brings them to blows, and while it all ends peacefully, the brawl results in Catalina's banishment to the Chilean front, to Paicabí ("a soldier's worst nightmare"), to Nacimiento ("a shortcut to the grave"), and to the Valley of Puren, scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the Araucanian Wars.

The fight also presages their fatal meeting several years later when, with typical indirection, Catalina accidentally kills her brother in another man's quarrel. Her handling of this disaster is particularly instructive. Chapter 6 ends with her terse expression of grief—"Captain Miguel de Erauso was dead, they buried him in the Franciscan monastery, and I watched from the choir—God knows in what misery!"—while chapter 7 opens with her trans-Andean flight to Tucumán across the dry, barren, body-strewn Cordillera. Ever the colonizer, Catalina rarely looks around her except to count churches and evaluate Peru's natural bounties, but in this, her most expansive moment of description, she conjures a vision of waste in which all the landscape conventions of medieval romance seem to reassert themselves. This passage gives way almost immediately to her finest comedy of disguise, as she eludes the marital designs of two different women. Notwithstanding the appeal to eros, however, we understand that Catalina's descent into outlawry has begun—chapter 7 ends with her stealing a mule—and that her life is now guided by remorse.

The third sequence of actions I wish to point to has to do with Catalina's sexual life. It is no surprise, given her circumspection in other areas, that Catalina is fairly mum when it comes to her sexual preferences. Only once is she explicit about her "taste . . . for pretty faces." Otherwise, from time to time, she twitches aside the curtain on a scene of unmis-

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Rhodora Vennarucci <vennaruccid@denison.edu>

Formation Process Exercise Response

1 message

Murphy Goode <goode_m1@denison.edu> Mon, Feb 9, 2026 at 2:03 PM
To: Rhodora Vennarucci <vennaruccid@denison.edu>

1. Over the course of the year I accumulate various items on my floor such as boxes of food or books for classes, making them primary refuse. My garbage can is where I discard secondary depositions. I do have provisional discard in my room! I have been a figure collector for about 12 years and my figures vary in terms of collector's value, and my provisional discard is packaging and boxes. Figures greatly depreciate value if they are damaged or if you do not have the original packaging it came in. This would qualify as provisional discard because it is not something I use regularly and it is kept out of sight under my bed, similar to an attic.
2. I take my personal belongings, and leave school provided items such as the desks, chair, etc. I do not tend to leave anything that I own behind.
3. Something that will leave a record of me previously living in my dorm room is a scratch I accidentally got on the wall when I was moving a desk (don't tell anyone). Additionally, a little bit of my hair might be left in my room.

Murphy Goode

takable erotic activity, and we are left, without benefit of commentary, to piece things together. These scenes, scattered throughout her memoir, provide a delicious counterpoint to the principal narrative of male action and conquest, but they never coalesce into an independent plot of the sort we have come to expect when a heroine puts on breeches. Catalina's disguise falls, but within a plot driven by her increasing lawlessness and ill luck. Thus, there is no Shakespearean moment of gender recognition, no Sebastian to pronounce smugly that "nature to her bias drew," no disconsolate Phebe to exclaim, "If sight and shape be true, Why then, my love, adieu!"

The lack of a recognition scene of this sort is the unmistakable sign that Catalina's disguise transcends comic convention. However much it may delight us with the possibilities of transformation, the traditional comedy of cross-dressing is driven by the marriage plot, and as such strongly privileges heterosexuality, happily unknotting in the end all of the tangles which disguise has created. Such is not the case with Catalina's memoir. Though she was not above invoking certain comic conventions of the disguised heroine—especially when recounting how the attentions of other women threatened to lead to marriage—her story is free of the heterosexual bias that underlies such comedy. The men she portrays—whether masters, commanders, lawmen, troopmates, confessors, or gambling partners—are never potential lovers. The women, by contrast, almost always are. They range from young girls under the supervision of male guardians, to self-reliant wives and mistresses, to the cloistered nuns of Lima, Guamanga, and La Plata, and there is every reason to assume that some of them, at least, knew Catalina's secret.

While free of heterosexual bias, however, Catalina's memoir is not free of a certain contempt for other women which may strike some as male in flavor. Doña Beatriz de Cardenas's love of finery is ironically counterpointed by her closet lechery. Doña María Dávalos, the damsel in distress, is an unlooked-for bother whom Catalina willingly hands off to her mother, the La Plata nun. The women of Tucumán have no more sense than to plot marriage to the first young Spaniard to present "himself." There is a strong suggestion in these and other moments that Catalina's contempt is founded on a genuine disgust with the dependency and deception heterosexuality enjoins upon women.

But just as Catalina's cross-dressing is something other than a comic disguise, so her contempt for other women's heterosexual inclinations is something other than a simple disgust with the roles they must play in order to get and keep a man. Her preference for male clothing was absolute. It not only freed her from womanly obligations, sexual and otherwise, it also allowed her a freedom, sexual and otherwise, in the world at large. Long after that world had come to know who she was, she continued to dress as a man—with the pope's blessing, her male garb ceased to be a disguise and became a privilege.

The plot (if we may call it that) centering on Catalina's homosexual preferences is fractured, partial—not surprisingly in an autobiographical text that is now nearly four hundred years old—a sort of understory to the more visible narrative architecture of male conquest and aggression. It is never entirely out of sight, however, and surfaces with astonishing clarity and completeness in the final scene, when two Neapolitan prostitutes, engaged in turning a trick, pause momen-

tarily to salute Catalina. This, the memoir's only true recognition scene, is at the same time, significantly, a scene of seduction. The prostitutes know Catalina, they beckon her in a lisping sing-song: "Señora Catalina, where are you going, all by your lonesome?" The question is full of sexual interest—who knows what Catalina's answer might have been, had she not interrupted them in the age-old pose of plying the opposite sex? Thus caught, however, they supply the final strokes to her self-portrait. With an outburst of conspicuously manly language, she silences their laughter and ends her story: "I have come to deliver one hundred strokes to your pretty little necks, and a hundred gashes with this blade to the fool who would defend your honor."

Are we justified in reading this final flourish of bravado as Catalina's parody of masculinist culture, with its vaunting claims of superior strength and its penchant for settling matters through physical action? Surely we are, and yet to see her simply as an indicter of male-dominated culture, an early feminist woman warrior come to set the record straight, is to sell short the complexity of Catalina's story. Throughout the memoir, Catalina has persistently made fun of men who talk big, only to find themselves bested by her in combat. From Señor Reyes in chapter 3 to the chatty Italian of chapter 25, she has exposed them as unskillful braggarts whose verbal insults to her "manhood" she is more than able to avenge. Conversely, her most fearsome opponent is the man she calls The Cid, a sinister figure in large part because he is a man of so few words. But while mere verbal machismo is always suspect in Catalina's eye, she never undercuts true skill in a soldier or swordsman—especially her own, of which she was justifiably proud. As Stephanie Merrim has written, "For women warriors such as Erauso, the mere change of dress effected a complete change in gender identity."[4] The unveiled Catalina exploits her "true" gender in shaping the story of her life, using it to create moments of comedy and suspense, but her values remain largely those of the men with whom she soldiered, gambled, and fought.

Thus, while Catalina mocks her male opponents and the heterosexual, hierarchical society to which they belong, she also works to reaffirm that society, measuring her own accomplishments (and the validity of her own extraordinary narrative!) by the standards it sets forth. There is never a hint of complaint, nary a plea that the reader regard her as "victim." On the contrary, Catalina seeks only "to win," and her boast is that she can do so, whatever the rules may be and whoever may own them. Moreover, Catalina's victories—her sense of self and valor—are culled from the land at the expense of the indigenous people of the Indies, and often at the expense of the women, Spanish-born or indigenous, whom she chances upon during her travels. It would be a misreading to see her as anything other than the perfect colonialist, manipulative, grasping, and at moments out and out bigoted. To align Catalina, as a cross-dressing "other," with the victims of colonialism is to miss the truth that the rewards of her transformation were gained almost wholly at their expense.

At once racy and mordantly sarcastic, at times bitter, at others bright, Catalina's memoir is as contradictory as the New World itself. She is an anti-hero we can't help but like, and yet regardless of how much we may like her, regardless of her tongue-in-cheek criticisms of the subordinating masculinist culture, she is not one on whom we can easily hang a

4. Stephanie Merrim, "Catalina de Erauso: Prodigy of the Baroque Age," *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts*, no. 43 (1990), p. 38.

sign or banner. A transvestite with passions, intelligence, and innate skill, Catalina de Erauso is also a colonialist, and in her version of new world history the underdog eagerly exchanges roles with those in power and, having gained power, exercises it just as capriciously. As a bizarre subtext to the colonialist tale of battlefield valor and bravery, Catalina's story reminds us that it is the invisible characters, hovering in obscurity about the edges of the scene, who complicate and thus complete the historical record. Today, as feminism finds itself at a crossroads, struggling with a crisis of identity, Catalina's strange and contradictory narrative may serve to illumine both the costs and the pleasures of independence in a changing, but still power-driven, society.

The little that is known of Catalina's life after 1626 exists in a handful of scattered documents. On September 29, 1629, in San Sebastian, she formally signed over to her married sister, Mariana, her portion of the family estate "as one of the children of Miguel de Erauso and María Pérez de Galarraga," receiving in exchange one thousand *reales* ready money and letters of credit to be redeemed in Madrid and Seville.[5] Then in 1630, she returned to the Americas, this time to Mexico, to live out the rest of her years there as Antonio de Erauso, mule-driver and small merchant.

We know this from two eyewitness accounts of Catalina in her later years, and they are worth quoting at length as the

5. Lucas G. Castillo Lara, *La Asombrosa historia de Doña Catalina de Erauso, La Monja Alférez, y sus Prodigiosas Aventuras en Indias* (Caracas: Editorial Planeta Venezolana, 1992), p. 318.

only such documents in existence. The first comes from Captain Juan Pérez de Aguirre, who testified in San Sebastian in 1640, in a hearing on the Erauso estate, that he had been

> in the city of New Veracruz, in the Kingdom of New Spain, in March of 1639, and had asked Captain Domingo de Portu, of San Sebastian, and Captain Francisco de Endara, also of San Sebastian, for news of Miguel, Francisco, Martin and Domingo de Erauso, and had been told they were all dead—Francisco in the city of Lima, in his capacity as majordomo or secretary to the Viceroy; Miguel in Chile; and that he couldn't remember where the others were said to have died, but it was common knowledge that they were all dead, all excepting a brother [*hermano*] of theirs called *Don Antonio de Erauso, alias Alférez Monja*, with whom he had spoken at this same time, in the city of Veracruz, and who had confirmed the deaths of the four brothers.[6]

The second comes from Nicolás de la Rentería, who in 1693 dictated an account of his meeting with Catalina to a fellow Capuchin friar, declaring that, in 1645 in Veracruz,

> he saw and spoke several times with La Monja Alférez doña Catarina de Erauso (who went there by the name of Antonio de Erauso); that she had a mule pack with which she, along with some slaves, carried stuff all over, and that on those mules and with the help of those slaves, she transported goods to Mexico; that she was the King's subject and known as a person of much courage and skill; that she went in men's clothing, and wore a sword and dagger orna-

6. Ibid., p. 322.

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Rhodora Vennarucci <vennaruccid@denison.edu>

Daily Thoughts 1/28/26

Aurora Hodar <hodar_a1@denison.edu> Wed, Jan 28, 2026 at 1:49 PM
To: Rhodora Vennarucci <vennaruccid@denison.edu>

- I really liked how Monday's reading included a portion given to challenging/educating the reader on current terminology and why it is important to respect and use it over more outdated terms. As a CS major, I am very used to CS textbooks which often feel like the exact OPPOSITE of this so I appreciated the inclusion. (My CS reading today explained a concept by finding the optimal way to "pair men and women into marriages" and my professor had to pretty much address that this was a really outdated/questionable example).
- I am curious what the general field thinks about deciding to do an excavation or dig? The reading placed a lot of importance on how skilled of an archaeologist Wooley was and how that led to way more discoveries than otherwise might have been made at the time, but I'm curious if there's an element or time in which an archaeologist decides that a dig is important enough that it should not be attempted with their current level of technology? I feel like the answer is probably not, because theoretically it's hard to know what will be available in the future, and the information gained from an excavation could even help further research and understand of archaeological needs, but it is still something that has been sticking in my mind.

mented in silver. She seemed to be about fifty years old, of strong build, somewhat stout, swarthy in complexion, with a few hairs on her chin.[7]

A "Relación" of Catalina's final years, published in Mexico in 1653, places her death in 1650 in Orizava, on the road to Veracruz. She died an "exemplary death," according to the "Relación," and her funeral "was attended by the most important people of the town, for she had been loved by all of the nuns and priests in the region, and they gave her a sumptuous requiem and an honored sepulchre."[8]

This brief account is of doubtful authenticity, however, and may be an early example of the expurgative tradition that would soon transform Catalina into a legend of piety and penitence. Those pages in the Orizava church records for 1650, in which this event would have been noted, are mysteriously missing. The "honored sepulchre" where Catalina now rests has never been found.

Michele Stepto
New Haven, 1995

7. Ibid., pp. 322–23.
8. Rima de Vallbona, ed., *Vida i Sucesos de la Monja Alférez* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 1992), p. 174.

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

While *the story* of Catalina's life flourished in folklore, legend, drama, and other forms, the manuscript of her memoir led a quiet, unpublished existence. For a century or more following its composition, it was in the possession of the Urbizu family of Seville, the same family whose ancestor, Juan de Urquiza, had been Catalina's first master in Peru. Sometime during the eighteenth century, the Spanish poet Cándido María Trigueros made a copy of the original. From this copy, in 1784, the royal historian don Juan Bautista Muñoz (who may also have had access to the Seville original) made another copy. After Hispanicizing the Basque names and supplying a new title, *Vida y sucesos de la Monja Alférez . . . Escrita por ella misma,* Muñoz entered it in the papers for his *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, which remained unpublished at his death. Sometime in the 1820s, the Basque gentleman Joaquin de Ferrer obtained a copy of the Muñoz *Vida y sucesos* and set about verifying most of the facts and dates recorded, and restoring the Basque spelling of many of the surnames. Finally, in 1829, Ferrer had the memoir printed in Paris for the first time, as *Historia de la Monja Alférez Doña Catalina de Erauso, escrita por ella misma—The Story of the Lieutenant Nun Doña Catalina de Erauso, written by herself.* Only the Muñoz and Ferrer copies of the original manuscript now exist. The present translation into English is based largely on a 1918 edition of Ferrer's *Historia*, though we have also consulted Mu-

ñoz's *Vida y sucesos*, recently made available in an excellent edition edited by Rima de Vallbona.

There are several challenges facing the translator who would render Catalina's memoir in English. One, at least, is insurmountable—there is no English equivalent for the gender inflections of the Spanish adjective, which make a primary, grammatical notation of gender with practically every sentence, thus setting up a drumbeat of sexual self-identification that reverberates from one end of the text to the other. The fact that Catalina almost invariably uses masculine endings to describe herself is lost in English, as are those rare moments when she chooses a feminine ending. The relative disconnectedness of the participial phrase in Spanish poses another grammatical problem. Catalina uses this disconnectedness to great effect in the erotic scene in chapter 5, where she substitutes the combined participial/indirect object for the plainer subject-verb coordination in a series of phrases that leave us dazzled and uncertain about the precise event being recorded: "Y un día, estando en el estrado *peinándome* acostado en sus faldas y *andándole* en las piernas . . ." (italics added). The playfulness here is inscribed in the Spanish grammar itself, and while that effect is not possible to reproduce in English (in good English, at least), the combined evasiveness and breathlessness may be achieved in other, chiefly rhythmic, ways.

Grammatical differences aside, there is the matter of Catalina's deadpan tonality, especially as regards religious and political institutions and rituals. While her memoir in many ways offers a psychological blueprint of the Spanish mentality of conquest, she is by no means without attitude toward the people and institutions that threaten her freedom in the kingdom of Peru. Often, she conveys that attitude by means of the list, yoking together item after item so as to suggest boredom, if not outright contempt. Fortunately, the list in English often produces the same effect—and this is especially true in American English, which, like other New World languages, has been shaped by the need to amass detail, whether in a spirit of wonder, or outrage, or sarcastic disbelief.

Finally, there is the question of how to convey the tremendous speed of Catalina's memoir, its tumbling rhythms, its actions piled upon actions, without either doing violence to the English sentence or lessening the energy of her narrative voice. It has helped to remember that Catalina may have dictated her memoirs to an amanuensis, perhaps as she paced up and down in some Seville parlor, waiting for permission from the Council on the Indies to return to the Americas—recounting with spirited delight the story of her adventures there, now and then lunging with an imaginary sword at some remembered opponent, perhaps frightening the hapless scribe who was setting down her words, and taking pleasure in that—and that for this reason the flavor of speech, which is not always careful or concise and which often repeats itself, permeates the inmost fabric of the narrative. With this in mind, we have relied heavily on colloquial American speech, with its bias toward storytelling, its homespun vocabulary, its winking metaphors, its love of "and" splices. Sometimes, colloquial American English has provided us with a surprisingly exact translation of Catalina's seventeenth-century Spanish, while other times it has captured, in our view, the spirit of her phrasing. Remembering also that Catalina's Peru was on the western frontier of Spain's New World empire, we have plumped for colloquialisms with a distinctly "Western"

ring—readers familiar with Mark Twain's Huck Finn will detect his inspiring presence from time to time in this recreation of Catalina's voice.

All this aside, however, it has always seemed to us that the best translations were those that hued most closely to the original text, as opposed to those that take liberties with it in the name of invention or clarification. For this reason, nothing has been added here, nothing left out—not even the baffling discrepancies that dot the original.

LIEUTENANT NUN