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# CATALINA DE ERAUSO—BASQUE TRANSVESTITE: TRANSLATING GENDER

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Catalina de Erauso was a Spanish nun—turned soldier—who lived in 17th century Spain. Dressed as a man for almost two decades, she travelled to the Colonies to test her luck in the army, where she made the grade of ensign. In 1624 she wrote her memoirs. Unfortunately, the original manuscript was lost and the text which has survived is a copy, probably penned by an amanuensis. In 1996, an English translation of her memoirs was published. In my paper I will argue that the translation of the Stepto's translation reflects a cultural bias and shows little effort at researching the nun's deeds and words. I will also examine gender attitudes in the Renaissance, and later periods, and the role of the Church in curtailing women from attaining intellectual maturity. To back my claims, I use Catalina's original text and contrast it with subsequent editions. I hope to prove that the English translation veers more towards sensationalism than to a deep and abiding respect for the nun's misfortunes.

Catalina de Erauso, the Spanish novice and writer who lived in 17th century Spain is a colourful character, to say the least. Dressed as a man for almost two decades she travelled to the Colonies to test her luck as a soldier of fortune. After proving her mettle as a combatant, she made the grade of ensign. In 1624 she wrote her memoirs. Unfortunately, the original manuscript was lost and the text, which has survived today, is a copy, probably penned by an amanuensis (Vallbona 1984, 126).

In 1996, an English translation of her memoirs: *Historia de la monja alferez escrita por ella misma*, was published with the title: *Memoirs of a Basque Transvestite Nun in the New World*. This translation suggests facts which have, I am afraid, little historical basis. The title (bearing no resemblance to the Spanish one) embellishes the original with the words "Basque" and "Transvestite", in effect transforming the story of a daring, controversial nun into a postmodern parody.

I suggest that the use of such polemic anachronisms was geared to market the book to a broader audience (other than literary scholars versed in Spanish Golden Age literature) and that the translators did not research sufficient scholarly papers which would allow them to back up any evidence that de Erauso was indeed a Basque Transvestite. The spirit of the nun's words, in this case, was sadly altered.

My claims are not unfounded. According to Merriam Webster's New College Dictionary of English, the use of the word Basque dates from 1835. The word

transvestite, according to the same source, dates from circa 1922. As Catalina's words were penned at the end of 1600, these terms are unnecessary anachronisms not present in Catalina's original title.

The autobiography of de Erauso tells us the story of a novice who lived for fifteen years in a convent under the tutelage of her aunt, the prioress. After she is beaten by a recently arrived nun, she decides to escape the nunnery and travel the world. Catalina cuts her hair, hastily saws some male attire and asks for a job as a page. Her disguise was so perfect that not even her father recognized her: "...the other page went inside and I was left with my father. The two of us did not speak a word to each other, nor did he recognize me" (1996, 5).

After escaping from the residence where she worked as a page, she leaves for the Indies. There she joins the army, seduced by tales of easy bounty. In the chaos of battle she kills her own brother. Heartbroken (when she finds out what she has done) she flees the site of the killing and leads a life the good people of the Americas considers morally. Among her misdeeds are numerous duels, dalliances with women (some of them married) and games of chance. The authorities, alerted by tales of gambling, whoring and unlawful duelling, waste little time in dealing with the spirited nun. When she is finally sent to jail, de Erauso is forced to confess her crimes (and true gender) to the Bishop of Guamanga; then plead for forgiveness or be executed.

The bishop arranges for her to enter the nunnery again. De Erauso travels to Spain (under the Church's protection) where she demands to see the king. In her Memoir she describes the Royal meeting: I "... begged him to reward my many services, which I outlined in a memoir placed in the royal hand" (1996, 73). Her wishes are granted. The King bequeaths her a sizable pension to reward her for services rendered.

From the literary perspective, the nun's memoirs serve two purposes. In the first place, as a tangible proof to document de Erauso's exploits, underlining her services as soldier to the King of Spain. Second, as a voluntary confession (a literary record of atonement—and a form of expiation—to ask the Church for forgiveness). There is also a secondary benefit implicit within the document: Catalina "markets" herself by means of self-adulation in order for his Majesty compelled to grant her a Royal pension.

A woman in the early seventeenth century who has the presence of mind, courage and fortitude to overcome such enormous odds whilst turning a potential explosive situation into an opportunity is unusual. Her story, likewise, mirrors several of the nun's unconventional traits. The tale of this spirited woman is filled with such fantastic elements that some authors have questioned the former novice's existence. The bone of contention seems to be a discrepancy in the date of birth. The official birth certificate indicates Catalina was born in 1592. Remarkably, her memoirs make her appear three years younger: 1585 (Vallbona 1984, 24). This mistake, in itself, is hardly remarkable. Although the Church did keep very exacting dates, a plausible explanation for the error is that the nun may have believed she was younger than she really was.

In addition to Church records and birth certificates, there are several official documents—and other historical sources—which proved de Erauso lived. There are currently two portraits painted by the artist Pacheco revealing the likeness of Catalina. One of them graces the cover of the Spanish and American editions (Vallbona 1984, 18).

On the literary front, there are two surviving descriptions portraying this unconventional woman. Munarriz (1986) cites as an example the following paragraph, authored by Pedro "el Peregrino", who claimed to have examined the nun in Italy, in 1626.

The fifth of June came to my house the ensign Catalina de Erauso, a woman from Viscay. She came from Spain and had arrived in Rome the day before. She is a maiden of about thirty-five years.

> [...] She is tall and stocky, and her appearance is more masculine. She does not appear to have breasts bigger than a child. When questioned, I believed she used an ointment given to her by an Italian. It must have been very painful, but it was her wish (1996, 85, my translation).

The other literary portrait corresponds to Fray Nicolás de Rentería. Vallbona (1984, 23) states that the priest met her in 1645 and described her as follows:

> [He] was taken as a skilful and courageous heart who dressed as a man, carried a sword with silver carvings and seemed to be around fifty" (my translation).

There are also a number of historical documents, and testimonies, signed and conserved in the Archivo de Indias, which proved Catalina de Erauso lived, that she fought as a soldier and had been a novice. Among them, Vallbona cites an act of the parish, were she was baptized, dated 1592, acts of the convent of the Dominican Sisters of San Sebastián el Antiguo, and a military file, or "expediente" of services rendered to the crown dated February 19th, 1626, where the king's record keepers document that he granted her a pension of 500 pesos (1996, 18-24).

Catalina de Erauso's first printed manuscript was sent to press in Madrid, in 1625. The name of the printing press owner was Bernardino de Guzmán. The original manuscript, or its printed edition, has so far not been located (Vallbona 1984, 126). The copies of the nun's memoirs available today were penned by amanuensis and published by Joaquín María Ferrer in 1829. The title the copier chose: *Vida i sucesos de la Monja Alferez Doña Catalina de Araujo, doncella natural de San Sebastian de Guipozcoa, escrita por ella misma* appears to be very close to the original one, a copy of which Ferrer examined.

The story of the publication of Catalina's memoirs is as bizarre as that of the nun herself. Munarriz (1986, 6) argues that there was never a manuscript dating from the original date 1624. He suggests that:

> Her memoirs, in spite of what other bibliophiles contend, must have always remained manuscript, since there is no copy of any text dating to 1624 (my translation).

According to different sources (among them Munarriz and Vallbona) during the 18th century, a warden by the name of Domingo de Urbirú had copied by hand the story of the ensign nun. A poet who knew of him, by the name of Cándido María Trigueros, was allowed to make a duplicate. Trigueros authorized a further copy to be made. The author of this issue, Juan Baustista Muñoz, was writing a *History of the New World*, where an

account as fantastic as Catalina's must have immediately grabbed his attention. Partly as a result of this last copy, the Academy of History, in 1784, acquired the hand-penned autobiography. There it lay undisturbed until Felipe Bauza, a radical congressman in *Las Cortes* of Spain, re-discovered it. Bauza was condemned to death for his political views under the reign of Ferdinand VII. He had a friend who, like him, was given the death penalty. His name was Joaquín María Ferrer (Munarriz 1986, 6-9). The future editor of the first printed edition served in the Cortes with Bauza and shared with him many of his political principles. The death penalty was suspended and both politicians were exiled. Bauza to London and Ferrer to Paris. According to Munarriz (ibid., 7):

> The idleness of exile made Ferrer undertake the curious profession of an editor, and remembering her countrywoman, since he himself had been born in Pasajes de San Pedro, Guipuzcoa, wrote letters to Spain to test the veracity of the nun's account.
> After finding a birth certificate and a "File in relation to the merits and services of Doña Catalina de Erauso", preserved in the Archivo de Indias, [he thought] they were irrefutable proof of the veracity of her story (my translation).

Ferrer published his first edition in Paris, in the printing press of Julio Didot. He wrote the prologue and made critical notes about the nun's exploits. In a spur of the moment decision, he added to the book a comedy, with a similar title, allegedly written by Don Juan Perez de Montalbán: *La Monja Alferez* (Munarriz 1986, 7).

According to Vallbona (1984, 124), the original title Ferrer used was: *La Historia de la Monja Alferez escrita por ella misma, (The Story of the Ensign Nun Written by Herself)*. Since the "prologue of the first edition caused undue polemic" making some critics question the "authenticity of the memoirs" (ibid.), the second edition did not have many of the original annotations.

The first English translation had almost as many adventures as its Spanish counterpart. According to Munarriz (1986, 7), Ferrer's publication of the nun's exploits was well received by the French critics. The *Revue of Deux Mondes*_published a "...mediocre French version, reedited as a book in 1830" (my translation). This version led Thomas Quincey to write a parody of the nun's story with the title *The Nautico Military Nun of Spain* in 1847 (Vallbona 1984, 429). In 1908 Fitzmaurice-Kelly translated the first English version of the autobiography. He titled it *The Nun Ensign*. In his introduction, he stated that "the text was written by a good hand, who transcribed from the *Relaciones*,[1] or the very originals authored by Catalina de Erauso" (Vallbona 1984, 156, my translation).

The American edition of 1996, which I found somewhat unsettling, was translated by Gabriel and Michele Stepto. The translators used "...a 1918 edition of Ferrer's *Historia,* though we have consulted Muñoz's *Vida y sucesos* recently made available." The translators chose to alter the original title of the: a) Ferrer's edition b) The translations into

[1] The *Relaciones* are, according to Vallbona (1984, 136), documents of the time, published around 1624, which tell in a fantastic setting the story of Catalina de Erauso. They were written in the third person and were not written by the nun.

English, and used "Basque" and "Transvestite" which are clearly anachronisms and tend to mislead the reader, who might expect a more sensationalist account.

In the case of the term "Basque", it is a highly sensitive word with political connotations as, recently, it has been tied to the violent exploits of the Basque Nationalist Party and the terrorist attempts of ETA. Basque nationalism is hardly a product of the 17th century, but rather a derivative of the complicated regional situation of Spain. In the days when Catalina lived, people from that region used the term *Vizcainos* (loosely translated as Viscayans) to identify themselves.

In addition, the word Basque refers to a very specific language. Catalina's memoirs are written in Spanish. There is no reference whatsoever, in the text, to idioms, words or anything which might lead scholars to believe Catalina either spoke or wanted her memoirs to be published under the term Basque. Vallbona supports this contention:

In her research about the nun's work, she states that Catalina de Erauso was proud of her Spanish legacy. The nun, she claims, does not make any mention of her Basque roots, other than to state where she had been born (Vizcaya) and how she missed her birthplace. This statement is proven twofold in de Erauso's memoirs.

The first instance is the part where she tells the readers she chose to live as a soldier, serving the crown of Spain. In her military career, she participated in many campaigns in which she defended the interests of the Spanish Empire. It is also important to mention that she did not refer to herself as Basque, but rather as "vizcaina" (a native of Vizcaya). Ferrer states that "...in America they generally referred as *vizcainos* to everybody who was originally from the provinces of Navarre" (cited by Vallbona 1984, 300). The word vizcaino, in time, became generic for anyone coming from the three future Basque provinces.

The second episode is very poignant. While travelling through Europe, Catalina engages in a duel to defend the honour of Spain. In her memoirs she narrates it as follows. On her journey to Rome, where she is to meet the Pope, she has a chance encounter with a man. The impudent lout, proud of being an Italian citizen, makes disparaging remarks about the Spanish people. Catalina challenges him with her sword and makes him recant his words (Vallbona 1984, 212). It is important to note that the Italian duellist did not make disparaging remarks about the "Basque" provinces or even about Viscay, but rather about Spain. Judging from her own accounts, it appears as if she herself felt more Spanish than Basque.

The word "transvestite" (arbitrarily added to the title of the American edition) is also problematic. Michele and Gabriel Stepto suggest that Catalina never sought male lovers. Their affirmation is based on the nun's comments mocking almost all masculine characters. However, they claim, she embraced the possibility of female relationships. The reason for their certainty, they continue, is that the nun reflects. "...a certain contempt for other women which may strike some as male in flavor" (1996, xxxix). Her seemingly disdain for other women is shown in the plot, which according to the translators, centres on: "...Catalina's homosexual preferences (...) not surprisingly in an autobiographical text" (ibid., xxxix).

The controversial assumptions of the translators go beyond the title to encroach in the context of the manuscript, and it is my intention to prove a certain bias on their

part when presenting the historical and literary facts Catalina de Erauso elected to share with us.

The Steptos are not the only authors to make assumptions based on little historical evidence. A good example which serves to illustrate this biased view, among some translators, is the case of Benedetta Carlini. Carlini was a Florentine abbess who, in 1622, was accused *of irregular practices* and sentenced to incarceration for forty-five years. Some of the claims against her were that she had mystical visions, that she had affirmed to possess the stigmata and that she had dared to question some of the Church's teachings and beliefs.

In 1985, amongst much speculation, a narrative of her trial was published "under the guise of A Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy" (Davies 1998, 509). Like the title, the contents failed to prove its assumptions regarding the unfortunate nun. Davis (ibid.) rightly affirms that

> [T]he post-Renaissance Inquisitors had focused on the defendant religious beliefs [and] they not only failed to emphasize the lurid details of a 'lesbian lifestyle'; they simply were not interested.

One of the reasons for launching the abbess' book, with such a catchy title was, according to Faderman, that "...the apparently oxymoronic term '...lesbian nun' easily tickles the curiosity... and guarantees the sale of certain number of books" (cited by Davies 1998, 509).

Catalina's autobiography's alleged homoerotic content has been approached by some researchers in a more scholarly way. Velez (1996, 394) sustains that "...there is a double generic disorder", where the "...discourse of the protagonist about her transvestism creates a sexual disorder which foments a textual disorder". Merrim (1999, 8) corroborates that view adding that "...she may reject the feminine, but the text by no means obliterates de Erauso's dual nature both as masculine and feminine" which tantalize the reader with "...the character's sexual ambiguity". Garber (1996, viii) comments that "...it might seem intriguing to read this [the memoirs] as lesbianism *avant la lettre*, an instance of female homosexuality". This last author cautions the reader to beware as "... these readings are all allegorical". Vallbona (1984, 195), who did exhaustive works in this topic, suggests that there is ambivalence in the memoirs product of the life of the adventurous nun: "...for two decades she was dressed as a man; this not only implied to wear male attire, but to find gestures and a language which would not betray her gender" (my translation). However, the scholar states firmly that there are no historical facts to prove her sexual ambivalence corresponded to something other than the unconscious use of the masculine ending because of "...force of habit manifested in the written text" (ibid., 196, my translation).

Because the story of de Erauso borders in the fantastic, many scholars have tried to prove that her adventures were a product of some writer's fertile imagination. Merrim (1999, 6), for example, suggests that due to the fact that "we possess no autograph or original printed copies of work, which was deposited in the printing house of Bernardino de Guzman in 1625" there is definite ground to doubt "the text's

authenticity". Vallbona (1984, 173) on the contrary, maintains that there is enough evidence in the written work and facts of the nun's life and exploits (that can be corroborated with historical documents) to suggest that Catalina de Erauso either narrated the story to an amanuensis or that she herself wrote it. She continues by mentioning that what seems outlandish, or just purely amazing, in the memoirs, could be attributed to elements of the picaresque novel in the text.

In reference to these fantastic elements, Fitzmaurice-Kelly poses the question of the dividing line between reality and fiction in the literary genre of the autobiography (cited by Vallbona 1984, 183). There are, it seems, just too many discrepancies between the historical facts and the narration. Vallbona and Merrim concur that, in the absence of an original manuscript to compare it to, the text we have today makes it highly unlikely to discover any evidence to judge how much of the version Ferrer published was doctored. Vallbona (1984, 245), however, suggests that "...there is a certifiable basis of truth in the *Vida i sucesos de la Monja Alferez*" (my translation).

Nevertheless, the lack of consistency in the text and the absence of the original manuscript hardly excuse the change in the word-endings and the inopportune additions of anachronisms in some of today's versions of the nun's exploits.

The reason for these alterations, I argue, is the superimposition of modern notions into the text, in part derived from the cultural bias of the editors and/or translators and also as a way to make the story more sensationalist. By adding terms with strong connotations such as "basque" or "transvestite", the editors/translators might have sought to assure themselves access to a broader audience.

In the case of the American edition, these additions are even more dangerous, as some of the terms are fraught with delicate gender connotations. Writing about the views of gender in the Renaissance, Lacqueur (1990, 124) suggests that:

> The modern question about the 'real' sex of a person, made no sense in this period, not because two sexes were mixed, but because there was only one to pick from, and it had to be share by everyone.

A woman's body was thought to be the inverse of a male, the only difference (Renaissance men and woman believed) was that her genitalia were turned inwards, instead of outwards. If the men and women in the 15th to the 17th century opted out of emphasizing gender differences, it is hardly likely for Catalina to be an exception. Her work *Vida i sucesos* does not suggest a strong deviation from this pattern.

It is not surprising that in the early sixteenth century, a time characterized by a return to traditional values when the Church sought means to unify its domains, Catalina's memoirs might seem unusual, even unbelievable at times. One of the questions I kept asking myself—as I read the text—was how did she manage to fool others into believing she was a man even after being severely wounded in the chest. The nun, herself, never answers this question. On the contrary, she fuels the reader's expectations by avoiding the issue of whether she considers herself a male or a female. The only historical fact supported by several sources (one of them Pedro el Peregrino in his literary portrait), is that she was a virgin by the time she, or her literary alter ego, wrote the autobiography.

If we examine the language she uses, in the Spanish original (the *Relaciones*) sometimes she refers to herself as a he, with masculine endings, such as "bien tratado, bien vestido y galán" (1996, 14) or "yo quedé atónito" (ibid., 31). In others, she uses the feminine ending, such as "y por su querida Catalina, la monja"[2] (ibid., 26). Vallbona (1984, 196) finds that all allusions to her masculinity were extrapolations of the amanuensis who could have "forgotten the female identity of the nun" (my translation).

To help fuel possible misconceptions about her gender identity, after she returned from Rome and was given an audience with the King of Spain, Catalina decides to journey back to Mexico—with a royal pension in her hand granted by Philip IV—where she changes her name to Antonio de Erauso and dresses as a man till the day she died.

The translators of the 1996 version in English, Michele and Gabriel Stepto, stated that they had used Ferrer as their source. They claimed, as well, to consult the manuscript *Vida i sucesos de la Monja Alferez Doña Catalina de Araujo, doncella natural de San Sebastian de Guipozcoa, escrita por ella misma,* that Vallbona reproduced as a critical edition. It would appear, however, that their concern with the homoerotic content of the text, as well as their poor choice of words for the title, might have made them overlook much of the research written about de Erauso.

A title in a book is the window that opens the world for readers to peek into its soul. By choosing a controversial title such as: *Catalina de Erauso, Lieutenant Nun: Memoirs of a Basque Transvestite*, the words of a very unusual woman have been seriously altered.

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[2] "Well treated, well dressed and dashing." "I was astonished." "And by her dear Catalina, the nun" (my translation).

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