Writing of the Frontier: Blurring Gender and Genre in the Monja Alférez’s Account

KATHLEEN ANN MYERS

One night in the early 1620s, the streets of Lima filled with onlookers as the now infamous Lieutenant Catalina de Erauso (1592–1650) arrived in a litter escorted by 10 men of cloth and six swordsmen. After having disguised herself as a man for nearly 20 years and earning a reputation as a brave soldier and rogue on the frontiers of the Spanish empire in Chile, Catalina had been ordered to take the veil as a nun. She had killed a man in a duel over a card game and in order to protect herself from the law, she had confessed to a bishop and revealed her true identity as a woman who once lived in a convent in San Sebastian, Spain. The bishop spared her life under the condition that she return to her previous profession as a bride of Christ.

In her account to the bishop, Catalina reported having been born to a well-to-do family in the Basque country; entering her aunt’s convent at the age of four, escaping before professing at age 15, and donning male garb to serve as a page before embarking for America, where she worked at various occupations including those of merchant and soldier. Catalina also confessed to having maimed and killed many men. Thus, after years of battles against the fierce Mapuche (frequently referred to as the Araucano Indians), duels over gambling and ladies, and quick escapes, the Monja Alférez—as she came to be known—entered a Lima convent for two years. There she awaited official confirmation from Spain that she had been a novice, but had escaped the convent before taking final and irrevocable vows, which carried with them mandatory enclosure for life. After letters criss-crossed the Atlantic and proof of her secular status finally arrived, Catalina again rejected the nun’s veil and put on trousers. Rather than take up her previous life on the frontier, she embarked for her homeland. She spent the next six years settling her share of the family estate, initiating a series of petitions, and dictating or writing her memoirs. In 1630, Catalina
again set sail for the Indies—this time, to base herself in New Spain as a mutececa and small merchant, under the alias of Antonio de Erauso—and, appears to have lived in relative obscurity.

The admiration and astonishment expressed by the crowds that had gathered to witness Catalina's entrance into Lima and the religious authorities who heard her confession were mere preludes to the sensation her story became in Europe. Although both canon and civil law prohibited cross-dressing, the highest ranking officials of the Catholic Church and Spanish Empire granted Catalina's petition to remain dressed as a man. The Monja Alférez's petition to the Crown, in fact, builds a case upon a dual argument: the merits of her deeds as a soldier and the singularity of her position as a woman fighting in the army. The reactions of Philip IV and Urban VIII upon hearing Catalina recount her story, as recorded later in the first person memoirs Vida y sucesos de la Monja Alférez (ca. 1625), confirm that it was indeed the uniqueness of her position as a woman soldier—and, more importantly, an "intact virgin"—that brought her such success.

Analysis of the textual representation in the Vida y sucesos of Catalina’s life story poses, however, the perhaps unanswerable question: to what degree are these first-person memoirs historical fact or legendary fiction? After examining a number of manuscript variants—none of which are the autograph manuscript by Catalina—and secondary documents, most scholars agree on one point: Catalina at least had a hand in her memoirs. Although uncertainty about the nature of the authorship of the Vida y sucesos limits the claims we can make, it functions to inscribe the memoirs firmly into colonial discourse, frequently characterized by issues of historical truth and mediation. Often a mixture of legal forms, literary topoi, historiography, and personal testimony, colonial narratives typically reflect a high degree of mediation as judges, confessors, scribes, and editors alter accounts for political and religious ends. While the Vida y sucesos undermines the notion of a single authoritative author, it reveals a dynamic discursive reconstruction of a life story, one based as much on "the historical record" as on religious, political, and literary codes as they were established in Spain and modified in America. Catalina de Erauso slipped through the cracks of Spanish society’s roles for women and reemerged as a cultural phenomenon, due in large part to her successful negotiation of these institutionalized codes and the geography of the American frontier.

In fact, most recent critics who study Catalina’s case (Marjorie Garber, Stephanie Merrim, Mary Elizabeth Perry, Rima Yallon, among others) elucidate seventeenth-century legal, religious, and cultural practices, and suggest that the Monja Alférez capitalized on loopholes in what has largely been perceived by twentieth-century scholars as a rigid gender and moral code. In addition, all critics point to the unusual blending of a broad range of literary genres in Catalina’s Vida y sucesos, including confessional literature, picaresque tales, soldiers’ accounts, chronicles, and cloak and dagger theatre. And yet, little has been said of the relationship this generic mixture may have to do with the gender-blending life of Catalina. Does it help account for her success? Does it reflect to any degree the idea that Spain’s encounter with the Americas often pushed literary, historical, and societal conventions to new limits? As a first step toward unraveling what I believe to be an intrinsic relationship between the sexual/textual, gender/genre cross-over in the representation of the Monja Alférez’s life story, it is important to flesh out period autobiographical and pseudoautobiographical forms used by men and women. Writing about the self was a highly gendered practice. The emerging awareness of the individual and his or her subjectivity, new definitions of gender roles based in part on Counter-Reformation teachings, and innovative narrative forms made possible the literary construction of new hybrid identities. Secondly, I suggest that the ad hoc nature of life itself on the frontier further facilitated the sort of gender/genre blending we find in Catalina’s story.

The early modern period witnessed a dramatic rise in written testimony of individuals’ claims before civic and religious institutions, such as the Consejo de Indias and the Inquisition. Writing from the position of a person who had been singled out and was now asking for recognition or reintegration, these so-called autobiographical writings or testimony typically were a response to public inquiry. Whether recorded as an act of obedience to a confessor, as in the case of most spiritual autobiography; as a soldier’s petition for recompense for services rendered, or as a rogue’s fictionalization and parody of the need to justify one’s actions, the “yo” reconstructed through these written forms inevitably engaged in dialogue with society’s models for behavior and created its subjectivity by adjusting its image to the “community’s gaze” (Fernández, 1992, 22). In doing so, historical subject became literary artifact. The dialogic dynamic between individual self-representation and institutional norms produced texts fraught with tension as authors acknowledged the centrality of real or inferred readers who in some manner judged the accounts according to recognized standards.

This tension between convention and the reality of an individu-
al’s life is further complicated in Catalina’s Vida i sucesos because the text melds together at least three distinct types of autobiographical representation (the soldier’s, picarón’s, and nun’s vida). The reader witnesses a hybrid gender and genre as Catalina undergoes a transformation from a traditional Basque girl educated in the convent to a New World soldier and outlaw, and, finally, to a celebrated European hero. A study of the ideological and gender-bound prescriptions that accompany each type of writing of the self reveals how culturally defined constructs are reworked in the Vida i sucesos. Using set first-person genres, the memoirs fashion an identity and text that allowed a woman to step outside of convention, to create a new identity that reflected the reality of a woman who wanted to see the world.

As the account opens, Catalina’s story is firmly inscribed into the literary form of the soldier’s tale. Like her comrades, the one-time alférez simply states the year and place of her birth, and her parents’ names. And yet, Catalina quickly departs from this explicitly male genre: she must deal with her biological sex in order to live and write a soldier’s life story. Altering conventional narrative sequence that moves from humble origins to a vagabond’s existence before finding a military vocation, the author slows the narrative tempo and describes her escape from the female environment of the choir, and her process of gender reconstruction through a three-year sewing project in which she makes herself a set of men’s clothing (chs. 1).14

Once outwardly transformed, Catalina returns to the conventional narrative structure, content, and tone for the soldier’s tale. Generally boasting a streamlined anecdotal focus on the narrator, rather than the larger historical context, these narratives are structured according to episodes “histórias cerradas,” as the protagonist moves from place to place. The style reflects oral paradigms first designed for telling the stories to others in the taverns, and later, adding the type of information needed to make a petition, such as names, titles, monetary sums, and distances traveled. Control of information and a curriculum vitae sort of appearance dominate many accounts. Content generally echoes social and military codes for soldiers: tales of heroic deeds, short descriptions of place, and accounts of defending personal honor and status—often dealing with women, dress, and titles. Critics of church and society frequently intermingle with these documents, but the biting satire and pessimism characteristic of period picaresque novels do not dominate.

Catalina recounts with notable economy several years of wanderings in Spain before embarking for America. Once there, leagues traveled, cities visited, posts held, and money received (and lost) as well as occasional ruses and vicissitudes dominate the account. Movement is rapid—both in actual travel and narrative tempo—while description is slight. After several misfortunes as a clerk, Catalina admitted her wanderlust “era mi inclinación andar y ver el mundo” (ch. 5); [I had a mind to travel and see a bit of the world] and joins 600 men to fight on the Chilean frontier against the Mapuche. Later she is banished to fight from the trenches because of a run-in over a lady with her brother (who never recognized Catalina in her disguise as a man). There she made her mark as a hero and rose to the status of ensign (ch. 6). In one of the few purely epic accounts in the narrative, Catalina describes:

Juntámonos otros con él, i alojémonos en los llanos de Valdivia en campaña raza, cinco mil hombres con harta incomodidad. Tomaron i asolaron los Yndios la dicha Valdivia. . . . Viéndola [bandera] llevar, partimos tras ella yo i dos Soldados de caballo por medio de grande multitud, atropellando i matando, i recibiendo daño: en breve caí en el onto muertos uno de los tres. Pregúntamos los dos. Logamos a la vantera, caí en un bote de lanza mi compañero. Yo recibí un mal golpe en una pierna. Maté al Cabecique la llevaba i quitósela, i apreté con mi caballo, atropellando; matando i hiriendo a infinidad, pero mal herido, i pasando de tres flechas, i de una lanza en el ombro izquierdo que sentía mucho. En fin, llegué a mucha gente i caí luego del caballo. i concluyó Alférez de la compañía de Alonso Moreno . . . i holgaz una. (ch. 5)

[We joined up with them and were quartered in the plains of Valdivia, on open ground, five thousand men, with everything but discomfort in short supply. The Indians sacked Valdivia and took the field . . . When I saw the flag being carried off I rode after it, with two horsemen at my side, through the midst of a great multitude of Indians, trampling and slaughtering away and taking some wounds in return. Before long, one of the three of us fell dead, and the two that remained pressed on until we overtook the flag. But then my other companion went down, sapped on a lance. I had taken a bad blow to the leg, but I killed the chief who was carrying the flag, pulled it from his body and spurred my horse on, trampling and killing and slaughtering more men than there are numbers—but badly wounded, with three arrows in me and a gash from a lance in my left shoulder which had me in great pain—until at last I reached our own lines and fell from my horse . . . I became the lieutenant of Alonso Moreno’s company . . . [and] I prospered and was well taken care of.]

After more than five years as alférez, Catalina left the battlefield, because she accidentally killed her brother in a duel, and headed for
El Dorado, La Plata, Potosí, and Cuzco to make her fortune. She tells of the near-death experience crossing the Andes (ch. 7), working in mining gold (ch. 9, 11), aiding sheriffs with law and order (ch. 8, 14), and defending Lima in a naval battle against the Dutch (ch. 17). Such heroic deeds, however, are nearly always undermined when she was forced out of towns, often after killing a man in a duel over a gambling dispute or a woman. As an outlaw, Catalina often took refuge in churches. Yet, the narrator parodies church practices when she talks of it “raining priests” when she is about to be executed (ch. 12), and she praises the Franciscans who taught her to hide the consecrated host (believed to be the actual body of Christ) in her hand in order to be moved from a jail to a church, where she could take sanctuary from the law. Like other conquerors, Catalina recounts her merits, but she does so with sketchy—and often dubious—detail and more than a touch of irony and criticism. She clearly shuns the colonization and evangelization projects of the Crown: “Quería el Governor sembrar allí para suplir la falta que llevábamos de bastimentos, i no vi que los infantes de ella, diciendo que allí no vimos a sembrar, sino a conquistar i coger oro” (ch. 9); [The governor got it in his head that we should plant crops here, in order to make up for what we had lost, but the infantry wouldn’t go along with it, saying we didn’t come out here to be farmers but to conquer and take gold]. While maintaining the often lively, action-orientation of the soldier’s vida, not yet a quarter of the way into her story Catalina undermines the soldier’s petition and exemplarity. Whereas men recount vicissitudes and failings, often criticizing certain aspects of society in the process, rarely is a soldier’s tale so blatantly transgressive and parodic. Randolph Pope argues that soldiers’ stories evolved over time from the early modern didactic portraits of exemplary caballeros to the somewhat contradictory self-portraits by Thirty Years War soldiers who variously embody characteristics of a loyal vassal and an unrepentant rogue. In the opening pages of his memoirs, for example, Catalina’s contemporary Domingo Toral y Valdés proclaims that he was “peregrinando por España como otro Lazarillo de Tormes” (quoted in Pope, 1974, 212); [traveling through Spain like another Lazarillo de Tormes]. By Pope’s calculation, 20 years after the completion of Catalina’s Vida i sucesos, the first soldier’s account written for pure entertainment was published. Estebanillo González’s Relación de vida (1646) proposes to simply “dar gusto al lector” [give pleasure to the reader] and depicts a soldier as a buffoon who fills his account with satire and parody. The reader who sought entertainment increasingly replaced the superior who might have rewarded the narrator for exemplary service.

Written in the midst of this paradigm shift from services rendered to roguish stories, Catalina’s Vida i sucesos may focus on the epic and transgressive aspects of her life story for the reader’s delight. Her formal petition had been submitted, and perhaps granted, by the time this lively account was drafted. This might further explain why Catalina’s Vida has no clear petition or specific addressee and shares a good deal with her Madrid counterpart, the Thirty Years War soldier, Alonso de Conteras, who wrote a story of his years as alférez and rogue. Like Catalina, Conteras first presented his relación de méritos and then wrote his Vida within years of hers (ca. 1630), and there is no direct petition or addressee. The ideology of exemplarity gave way to less didactic story-telling in both these soldiers; who, coincidentally may have both been in Madrid in 1624 and heard of each other. The effect of gender on the genre, however, changes the outcome of the protagonists’ lives. Whereas Conteras is knighted into the military Order of Malta, Catalina no longer can follow a military career, in spite of demonstrating her capacity for it and being granted a license to live dressed as a man.

Like Conteras’s brawling story, Catalina’s describes a society in flux and a moral practice that did not match the one being promulgated by the Council of Trent. Indeed, in Catalina’s case, the butt of many anecdotes is the patriarchal formation of a society in which men all too quickly drew their swords because of pride and boasting, and women were seen as objects to be married off or to be kept safely enclosed from other men.

In fact, the inherent petition for monetary reward or recognition in most soldiers’ accounts is all but absent in Catalina’s life as the language and content of the picaresque tale are intertwined with the story. The “yo” constructed, in fact, seems to ask for recognition of the cleverness exhibited in extracting herself from compromising situations. Writing when the picaresque was already a well-established genre, Catalina’s Vida shares with it an emphasis on an unrepentant rogue. Although Catalina does not share the picaresque story of an illegitimate birth and truly living on the margins of society, the text echoes the genre’s lexicon (“picaresco curmundo,” ch. 12), ideology (the parody of hard work in favor of “industria,” or cleverness, ch. 10), and employment (the protagonist moves from master to master living by her wits). Much of the narrative follows a pattern of playing with Catalina’s sexual desirability that led to the need for a quick wit, sword, and escape, as well as the resultant
hand-to-mouth existence. Indeed, the author seems to purposely inscribe the action into the picaresque genre with two key elements: the discourse of poverty and the discourse of sexuality. For example, Catalina’s first master in the New World asked her to marry his mistress (ch. 3). Although reminiscent of the situation that the popular fictional rogue Lazarillo de Tormes found himself in at the end of his tale, the Vida y sucesos rewrites the model (perhaps because nature dictated it); Catalina rejected the offer and moved on to a new post and master.

Catalina’s ambiguous gender role pushes literary conventions to new limits. A male pícaro generally lived by his wits and actions: if he had rights to a woman, he often used her sexual desirability to better his economic situation, but rarely is his own sexuality directly at stake. A pícaro, on the other hand, lived by her wits and her sexual desirability in order to dupe men and advance her own situation. Drawing on both pícaro and pícaro-prototypes; the protagonist of the Vida y sucesos blends the female protagonist’s use of sexual innuendo with the male’s tendency to use women and fall back on quick action to escape a tight spot. Catalina became the object of sexual desire, like her female counterparts, but took action to remedy the situation, like her male counterparts. The ambiguity of her gender categorization and the genre’s possibility for either a male or female central character allow Catalina, who in some aspects is both a male and female protagonist, to create a new spin on outcomes.

Catalina’s story of a woman, a self-proclaimed Monja Alferez, fits surprisingly neatly into the rogue’s tale, while also in some ways subverting the typical outcome. Avoiding the fate of most picaros, who become the butt of their own jokes through the comic distance created in the tavern and military life, Catalina remained firmly marginalized by society. Catalina became a woman of means and influence throughout most all ranks of secular and ecclesiastical society, reaching the Crown and the Vatican. In addition, she received her share of the family estate and remuneration for military service. And yet, in the end Catalina chose to return to the road—a choice the pícaro rarely had. Catalina’s trajectory is unique: her story began with enclosure in a well-to-do family and convent in the Basque region; it moved into the public arena of the tavern and military life in the periphery of the Spanish Empire; it jumped into the elitist arena of the courts of Madrid and Rome, and, ultimately, it returned to a relatively anonymous itinerant life in the Indies when she chose to travel the roads between Veracruz and Mexico City as a muleteer. Was it only in the vast uncolonized areas between New Spanish city centers that Catalina could live easily?

Notably, Catalina in many ways can only borrow the pícaros’s story to exploit her transgressive acts because she lacks the essential heroes sense of marginalization and pessimism key to the genre. Undermining the inherently conservative ideology of the genre, as maintaining the status quo, Catalina de Erazo overcame financial straits and triumphed in her gender choice. Although several critics have read Catalina’s success as completely dependent on her masculinist, macho rhetoric and her construction of patriarchal society, one epitomized by the soldier’s and rogue’s tales, such readings overlook the reworking of these literary forms and, thus, their accompanying ideologies. Her tale suggests that the geographies and politics of the Spanish colonies were fertile terrain for creating a hybrid gender and tale.

The final chapters of the Vida y sucesos flaunt a different type of genre—gender blurring, based on the most popular feminine life writing form. With the exception of a few short stints in jail, Catalina avoided serious consequences for her illegal acts, but by chapter 18 she came face-to-face with the bishop after killing “El Nuevo Cid” (The name of the opponent suggests an honorable, heroic prototype that the Monja Alferez symbolically underlines). Hard-pressed to seek sanctuary, Catalina began to confess—ever after swearing off confession in a previous situation. While still in picaresque literature with its examples of false confession, the narrative sequence blends with the spiritual or confessional autobiography, a powerful genre for religious women. The vida espiritual, also referred to as vidas de monjas, typically recalls a spiritual conversion that led to a religious life and great transformation: Part and parcel to this spiritual path was the taking of the religious vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. The account is at once apologetic and didactic, a petition for absolution of sins and an exemplar of God’s handwork. Women recount heroic battles against individual and community sin in their pursuit of divine union and salvation. Besides the spiritual and physical purity required by the genre, the vida espiritual is set apart from the previous two genres we have studied because of the very real mediation of the confessor. The narrative revolves around a triangular relationship of authority with confessor as judge, nun as visionary, and God as divine author. The confessor generally was in charge of ordering the account and determining its validity, while the nun claimed to be an “escritora por obediencia” who followed her confessor’s and God’s dictates.
Like some of her military and rogueish counterparts, Catalina confessed before God’s intercessor but her account of confession also borrows rhetorical elements from a nun’s vida and capitalizes on its inherent tension for control over the interpretation of the story told. In the scene where Catalina confesses to the bishop and unmaskst her true identity as a woman who had spent ten years in a Spanish convent, the convention of the transformative power of confession mixes with a highly condensed, parodic style:

Señora...la verdad es ésta: que soy mujer; que nací en tal parte, hija de fulano y fulana; que me entaron de tal edad en tal Convento con fulana mi tía; que allí me crié; que tomé el hábito; que tuve vocaciones; que estuve para profesor, por tal ocasión me salí; que me fui a tal parte, me desamé; me vestí, me corté el cabello; parti allí a acuñar y embarqué, aporté, trabajé, maté heren, malé, corrió, hasta venir a parar en lo presente a los pies de Su Señoría Ilustre. (ch. 20).

[Señor...the truth is this: that I am a woman, that I was born in such and such a place, the daughter of this man and this woman, that at a certain age I was placed in a certain convent with a certain nun, that I was raised there and took the veil and became a novice, and that when I was about to profess my final vows I left the convent for such and such a reason, went to such and such a place, undressed myself and dressed myself up again, cut my hair, throve here and there, embarked, disembarked, hustled, killed, maimed, wreaked havoc, and traveled about until coming to a stop in this very instant, at the feet of Your Eminence.]

No true spiritual transformation or conversion is recorded. The prototypical protagonist of a nun’s account, a repentant sinner overcome with cleansing tears and witnessing the manifestation of God’s grace, is absent from this account. In fact, the usual formula is inverted; the bishop’s face streams with hot tears upon hearing the confession.

The next scene further undermines the ideology and narrative conventions of a woman’s spiritual autobiography. Knowing proof of her virginity will be her trump card, Catalina invites the bishop to have matrons examine her; they report her status as an “intact virgin.” Catalina’s paradoxical situation as a sexually pure outlaw mocks the church’s insistence that sexual purity begets and reflects spiritual wholeness and virtue. The textual rendition of Catalina’s confession meets the genre’s requirement that transformation occur, but it subverts both the purpose and outcome. The internal spiritual process of transformation is externalized and secularized. No longer portraying a written record of a reconciliation between individual and God, the narrative form becomes Catalina’s safety-net for her gender change. By echoing and yet radically altering the genre’s central passage, the moment of conversion and confession before all that led to a return to the community’s norms, Catalina’s spiritual transformation becomes her gender (re)transformation. The confession to and absolution by the confessor-bishop is in many ways the narrative center of Catalina’s life story. Confession both saved her and, after a temporary reinstatement of the nun’s habit, served as the springboard for legitimizing her gender choice.

To emphasize further her inherent critique and practical use of Church and society’s sexual and moral codes, the author records the pope’s own marvel and approval of her “vida i corridas,” “sexo, i virginidad” (ch. 25); [life and travels, sex and virginity]. According to a broadside about Catalina’s life, which might be highly fictionalized, the pope even defended Catalina against a cardinal’s criticism, saying: “dame otra Monja Alférez, y le concederé lo mismo” (Vallbona 171); [Give me another Monja Alférez and I will give her the same [permission]]. The pope’s only request was that she observe the commandment “Thy shall not kill” (ch. 25). The final chapter of the Vida i sucesos also mentions the ranks of the rich and famous who wanted to catch a glimpse of the Monja Alférez, now more than just the plebeian crowds in the streets of Lina gathered round to witness the phenomenon of the manly woman. Whereas the conventional nun’s account bore witness to how a lowly woman’s life overcame the limitations of her sex and revealed the emplotment of the divine on it for a confessor, the Monja Alférez’s life rewrote that formula to bear witness to how a woman could undo “natural,” God-given gender categories with approval by the pope himself.

In destabilizing the transcendent meaning of confessional literature, altering the male soldier’s tale, and employing rules common to both the picaro and picara, the Vida i sucesos goes beyond the simple blurring of literary and gender conventions and creates a complex, at times ambiguous, text. Competing motives undermine traditional paradigms with their narrow embodiment (both literally and figuratively) of self-representation and identity. Although all autobiographical writing of the period tends to be a hybrid genre that moves between petition and authority, author and addressee, historical person and literary construct, the Vida i sucesos manipulates genres and their inherent gender-related rules to create a truly unique text, that even has a first-person narrator who fluctuates between using feminine and masculine adjectives to describe her/himself. Just as Alonso de Ercilla had revised epic tradition by
making the enemy the hero and Cervantes' mixed idealized literature with more realistic elements to create a new narrative genre. Catalina de Erauso's life story tweaked European legal codes and genres to create a new identity and narrative type for the cross-dressed woman living on the American frontier.

But, can we make any claims about Catalina's life and society beyond these literary claims? What can we make of Catalina's decision in the first place to reject the options of marriage or the convent for a well-born Spanish woman—the options chosen by her sisters—and, instead, to cross dress and follow in the footsteps of several brothers, who had left for America and held good military and administrative positions there?²⁹ And, how did the reality of establishing rule in a land thousands of miles from the Crown affect the roles of women? Surely, just as the reality of Ercilla's early life fighting the Mapuche influenced his epic tale, the reality of life on the frontier of the Viceroyalty of Peru influenced Catalina's story. No doubt, it is significant that the majority of Catalina's tale as a secretly cross-dressed woman took place in Peru; and that even after receiving papal permission to remain in male garb, she chose to return to America and, what is more, to a new viceroyalty and to a career that did not require permanent residency in a city.

In their search to answer some of these questions, Mary Elizabeth Peery (1992) and Stephanie Merrin (1994) have turned up few cases of cross-dressing in Spanish historical records and see most of the cases in literary sources as a means to an end for women to regain honor or lovers.³³ Merrin also discusses how Spanish tradition and moral codes seem to have severely restricted cases of impersonal women, even as they flourished in England, particularly in the English female novelists.³⁴ Neither study really explores, however, the radically different context that the Americas provided. Carmen Pumar Martínez (1988) sketches portraits of women of Spanish descent who made their mark in the New World as colonizers, governors, explorers, and soldiers. In many cases, it is the reality of establishing rule in a land thousands of miles from the mother country that allowed women to take over for husbands who died, as in the case of adelantada Isabel de Barro, or to work alongside lovers as nurses and soldiers (since wives were often absent), as in the cases of Inés Suárez and María Estrada who accompanied the conquerors of Mexico and Chile respectively.³⁵ However, Pumar Martínez mentions Catalina de Erauso as the only case of a woman living for years in complete disguise as a man (1988, 85–94).

And yet, some seventeenth-century narratives, such as the His-
show that persistence and hard work can perform miracles, and it happens regularly—especially in the Indies. Her account outdoes the roughish tales of many Thirty Years War soldiers; after nearly twenty years in America, Catalina’s life reflected the lawlessness, rebellions, mobility, and search for riches that characterized early seventeenth century Peru.

Such social, religious, and political upheaval and flux lent itself to itinerant lives, changes in positions, and, perhaps, identity. In the end, given this fluidity, was Catalina’s cross-dressing less of an anomaly in her times than we have believed until now? Only more archival research will help answer this question. The work done in the last 15 years to restore the most famous colonial woman, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, to the context of New Spanish culture—in particular, illuminating her participation in a widespread convent culture—provides an encouraging example to follow. By studying documents by many religious women writers, we have been able to appreciate Sor Juana’s role in an active feminine textual context. If more stories of cross-dressed military women in the New World are found, they may reveal that Catalina opted for a path that other women followed out of necessity or ambition; we may also see that, like Sor Juana, her story stands out because of the circumstances that aided her sensationalism: a bishop’s request and strong political ties through Basque comrades, combined with ambition, creativity, and adequate training to petition both king and pope.

While the actual number of female comrades in the military is pure conjecture at this point, we do know that women like Isabel la Católica dressed in armor to enter Granada upon its surrender and that the church had sainted several women soldiers, such as Joan of Arc, who demonstrated patriotic Christian behavior.25 Catalina’s petition to the king for reward states that she fought for him and for the Catholic faith, against infidels.26 In fact, as Stephanie Merrim (1994) notes, Catalina took quite literally Teresa of Avila’s advice to her nuns to be “more manly” in their behavior.27 While legend credits Rosa de Lima with invoking divine intercession to defeat the Dutch fleet that laid siege to Lima’s port in the first decades of the seventeenth-century, Catalina’s Vida i sucesos describes a cross-dressed woman soldier fighting on a flagship that was sunk in one of those naval battles (ch. 17). One with hands folded in prayer, the other with musket in hand, Rosa and Catalina soon received popular and institutional approval for their roles in defending the King’s Empire and aiding the Catholic faith—one because of her holiness, the other because of her bravery and creative rebellion. Paradoxically, however, as the first phase of Rosa de Lima’s canonization process came to a halt under orders from Rome in 1620s, the pope was granting permission to Catalina to continue living as a man and travel abroad. In the final analysis, Catalina de Erauso’s life and text may raise more questions than it answers. Examined in all its nuance and contradiction it parades before us ambiguities about gender and genre, and legal and ecclesiastical codes. It suggests a relatively unstudied fluidity in Spanish American society and institutions. The Vida i sucesos urges us to reexamine our assumptions that women had to follow the narrow dictates of moral and religious treatises on proper feminine behavior in the seventeenth century Hispanic world.

Notes

1. “The nuns were beside themselves when they took their leave of me, and I was carried off in a litter with a retinue of six priests, four friars, and six swordmen” (ch. 21). Catalina de Erauso (1992), Lieutenant Nun (translated by Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto. All translations of Catalina’s text are from this edition. The translation of Catalina’s title from “aflérez” into lieutenant is problematic. According to the second Relación (1625) (Erauso, 1995), Catalina was promoted to Sargento Mayor, but Vallbona (Erauso, 1992, 165n12) says that official documents show she only received the title of aflérez, or ensign. All citations of Erauso’s text in Spanish are from Vallbona’s edition. Because of the brevity of each chapter, instead of referring to the page number, I have chosen to make reference to chapter numbers.

2. During much of this time she went by the alias of Alonso Díaz Ramírez de Gómara.

3. The petitions are reproduced in Vallbona’s edition (Erauso, 1992), Appendix Number 2, along with notarized testimony from witnesses. These documents, among others, are also reproduced in José Ignacio Telleches Ugidos (1992). Both editions draw on Ferrer’s (Erauso, 1829) and José Toribio Medina’s (1956) works, as well as new archival material. The petitions include two separate ones to the Crown: one for remuneration for Catalina’s military services and the other for compensation for the robbery that occurred when she traveled to Rome in 1626. See Stephanie Merrim (1990) for a translation and study of the petition, which recounts her decision to cross-dress and be a soldier. The memoirs have been edited on a handful of occasions. The most recent, complete Spanish edition is Rima Vallbona’s (Erauso, 1992) and the most recent English translation is Michele Stepto’s and Gabriel Stepto’s (Erauso, 1996). See the bibliography in Vallbona (Erauso, 1992) for a complete listing of previous editions in English and Spanish. The document about Catalina’s share of her family estate is cited by Stepto and Stepto (Erauso, 1992) from Lucien S. Castello Lara, La asombrosa historia de Doña Catalina de Erauso, (Erauso, 1996, xiii); Telleches Ugidos’s (1992) reproduces many of the family’s wills and estate documents.

4. One of the few new documents that describes Catalina during these years is reproduced in Vallbona (Erauso, 1992, 155). Another is the Tercera relación (Mexico, 1653) (Erauso, 1995) discussed below.
5. See Mary Elizabeth Perry (1990), ch. 6 "Sexual Embolism," and Stephanie Merrill (1994) for more about cross-dressing in seventeenth century Spain.

6. This is Stephanie Merrill's (1990) central argument in her study and translation of this document.

7. For a history of the manuscript and its nineteenth century publication, see Vallbona (Erauso, 1992, 2-3).

8. Several theories exist about the extent to which Catalina de Erauso had a hand in the writing of her own memoirs. Most critics agree that she was extensively involved, but that the transcriber probably elaborated on her story either at the time of the original composition or later when it was copied. The original has been lost and we have only copies. One is the 1784 copy by the Real Academia de Madrid which has eighteenth century calligraphy but seventeenth century orthography and morpho-syntax. Rubio Merino (Erauso, 1995) publishes two manuscript versions found in the Catedral de Sevilla; these are not the same as the manuscript at the Real Academia, which is the one Ferrier based his first edition on (Erauso 1829, 21-27). Vallbona (Erauso, 1992, 2-11) sets out his theories, as well as Merrill (1994, 196). One of the points often made in the literary ghostwriter theory has been that Catalina did not have sufficient training to write such an accomplished piece on her own (Merrill, 1994, 195). Recent studies about the nature of convent life, however, reveal that Catalina may have been very-well trained in reading and writing after ten years in the cloister. Indeed, the memoirs themselves suggest that she had a good education: her uncle wanted to train her further since she read Latin well (ch. 1), and she repeatedly was given positions that required good bookkeeping skills and a high degree of managerial skill. In addition, traditional conclusions that posit Catalina’s lack of a formal education as proof of her lack of full authorship, ship do not take into account the power of oral story-telling, so common amongst soldiers and tavern-goers of the period. The highly embellished, set pieces that develop in a quick, lively language a scene, conflict, and resolution with a precarious escape are characteristic of popular story-telling. Vallbona (1992, 11) himself points to the need to explore these oral genres in order to better analyze the memoirs.

9. Mary Elizabeth Perry (1990) convincingly argues that Catalina’s case slipped through the legal system because civil law reflected society’s assumption that people would be prosecuted according to their biological sex rather than as a man or a woman. Both ecclesiastical and secular frameworks allowed for only two sexually-linked categories for adult whites. Catalina could not be prosecuted as a man for her misdeeds because she had been a man; but, neither could they proceed against her as a woman because she had lived as a loyal soldier. In one of the few literary studies of Catalina’s life and texts, Stephanie Merrill (1994) astutely argues that the baroque aesthetic, which prized singularity, marvelous, and the unveiling of a reality that is not what it seems, serves as a key to understanding Catalina’s success, as an anomaly her life had intrinsic literary and cultural value that mitigated the consequences of her transgressive acts. Catalina became a cultural icon through the manipulation of several generations of garish and fame. Marjorie Garber (Erauso, 1996, preface) points out that through this "category crisis" Catalina carves out a life of relative freedom for herself.

10. Stephanie Merrill, for example, briefly mentions the influence of the picareque tone, the theatricality of the narration, and the lack of interiority or remora characteristic of the soldier’s life (1994, 181, 195). Stepto and Stepto (Erauso, 1996) and Garber (Erauso, 1996, xxiii, xxiv) mention the complex mixture of literary forms from autobiography to confessional, pilgrimage, and picareque traditional structures, as does Pedro Rubio Merino (Erauso, 1995, 43-44, 50, 58). In the most extensive study of genre, Vallbona (Erauso, 1992) divides the narrative according to the schemes from the picareque (chs. 1-3), the chronicle of conquest (ch. 9) and others, cloak and dagger theatre and travel literature (ch. 9, 11-20), as well as various popular story-telling influences throughout (ch. 9-11). She also carefully focuses passages reminiscent of these genres.


12. Although "vidas de soldados" rarely were published in their own time, surely Catalina would have been familiar, after so many years in the army, with the form of the petition "de méritos y servicios" with and the relación, which proliferated during the first century and a half of the Hapsburg Empire. Generally not published until the twentieth century, these soldiers’ accounts may have circulated in manuscript form. For a twentieth-century edition, see Cossío (1956).

13. The text states her birth year as 1583, but the baptismal record states 1592; see Vallbona (1992, 151).

14. Ginés de Passamonte’s Vida (ca. 1604) is one of the few soldier’s accounts that describes having a religious calling, yet becoming a soldier because he did not have the necessary background and money to enter the religious life (Cossío, 1956).

15. Margarita Lovitas (1984, 141) uses this term in her book that examines three soldiers’ accounts.

16. Marjorie Garber emphasizes the memoirs frequent description of clothes and argues that Catalina is a transvestite (Erauso, 1996, preface); she fails to place this emphasis, however, in the broader context of soldier’s accounts, which often talk of clothing as it related to status.

17. "[M]ost was held in the jail, and when the priest had taken communion he gave it to me and turned back to the altar, and I instantly spat the wafer out into my right hand, shouting madly, ‘I call on the church! I call on the church! Complete heretical! The brothers were scandalized and kept shouting, ‘Here! Here!’ . . . The priests circled round me, along with a great number of townspeople—they lighted candles, turned a canopy over my head and carried me in procession to the city square, where everyone got down on their knees and a priest prayed the wafer from my hand and placed it in the tabernacle. . . . This was a scheme I had come up with thanks to a pious Franciscan, who gave me some words of wisdom when I was in jail, and took my last confession. The governor kept the church surrounded, with me under lock and key . . . “ (ch. 15). According to Catholic belief, the consecrated host became the actual body of Christ in the process of transubstantiation, and was only touched by the hands of a priest. Similar treatment of the church can be seen in Miguel Castro’s parody of the canonical hours (Cossío, 1956); see Pope (1974, 197).

18. As we will see, Alonso de Conteres is the closest in tone. Others, such as Miguel Castro’s Vida (ca. 1602) and Ginés de Passamonte’s Vida y trabajos (ca. 1604) (all in Cossío, 1956), have elements of the picareque, especially Castro’s retelling of amourous encounters, but also include a structure based on trials (and, therefore, deserving of merit). See Pope (1974) and Levits (1984) for further analyses.

19. Estebanillo González, La vida y hechos de Estebanillo González, hombre de buen nombre y descubierta por él mismo, Antwerp 1646 (Cossío, 1956); there were at least five other editions published in Madrid during the next hundred years. See Pope (1974, ch. 4).
20. Pope sees this as manifesting itself as “la desadaptación” that was increasingly expressed after 1600 (1974, 140). Autobiographers after Pacheco meet the insecurity of new social conditions with a certain sense of acceptance and adventure.

21. Catalina resubmitted her petition to the Consejo de Indias in August 1622, and in April 1626, after presenting a case to the king, she was granted remanu- ción for her services. See Vallbona for the chronology of these documents (Eraso, 1992, 119, 121).

22. According to his own Vida (ca. 1630), Alonso de Contreas left home at a young age after killing a boy, served in the army, was promoted to officer and later captain, met both the king and pope, and became the subject of a famous playwright’s drama. He also was a rogue, killed to protect his honor, and gambled. See the edition of his Vida in Conso (1956). Lope de Vega’s El Rey sin reino is very loosely based on Contresas’s life. Contresas lived with Lope (1622–23) who knew many of his tales first hand.

23. Only in later additions, once things no longer were going his way, is there evidence of a petition. Levidi discusses the 1633 and 1641 additions (1884, 129).


25. According to Vallbona’s division, chapters 1–6 correspond to the picaroesque (1992, 9).


27. See Stepho and Stepho (Eraso, 1996, xi–xii), and Perry (1990, 33).

28. Since women were considered both more prone to being instruments for direct manifestation of the divine and more in need of supervision of these gifts, the genre is dominated by women. For a more extensive discussion of this dynamic, see Myers (1998), Bilikoff (1999), and McKnight (1998, 54–59).

29. Vallbona restored the fluctuation between feminine and masculine adjectives, that is found in the original manuscript copy; the use of masculine adjectives, however, dominates (Eraso, 1992, 2–3, 15). She also notes that the first two books are filled with these feminine, and there is fluctuation between the masculine and feminine.


31. See Perry (1990, 131–33) and Merrim (1994, 185). Both authors base many of their conclusions on a variety of recent studies that examine the topic.


34. See Arías de Oroza y Vela (1965).

35. See Merrim (1994, 190). Interestingly, Christine of Sweden, who had helped the Counter-Reformation with her conversion to Catholicism and abdic-


