



Catalina de Erauso.

Erauso, Catalina de (ca 1592-ca 1650)

by Linda Rapp

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The life of Catalina de Erauso reads like a picaresque novel. Born, probably in 1592, to a noble Basque family in San Sebastián, Spain, she bolted from a convent before taking her vows, assumed masculine clothing, gave herself a new identity as "Francisco de Loyola," and, early in the seventeenth century, made her way to the New World, where she led the rough-and-ready life of a soldier in the Spanish colonies.

On the battlefield she was a formidable warrior; in her other exploits she gambled, engaged in dalliances with women, brawled, and faced death sentences for murder. Once her true sex was revealed, she became a celebrity in Spain.

She wrote--or perhaps dictated--a short memoir of her adventures. Public attention was not to her liking, however, and so she soon returned to America and lived in relative anonymity in Mexico. There she went by the name Antonio de Erauso and worked as a mule-driver and merchant.

Erauso's life soon turned into the stuff of legend. Throughout the centuries, her story has been retold in plays, novels, and films, some of which deny or obscure her lesbianism, while others reclaim and celebrate it.

Erauso's Memoir

Erauso's claim to literary fame is her memoir, which has also served--sometimes very loosely--as the source of some of the many dramatizations of her life.

Erauso's memoir was probably set down between 1624 and 1626 but was not published during her lifetime. The whereabouts of the original are now unknown. The Spanish poet Cándido María Trigueros copied the manuscript sometime in the eighteenth century. Spanish royal historian Juan Bautista Muñoz made another copy in 1784. He was certainly working from the Trigueros document and may have consulted the original.

Muñoz included the Erauso memoir in his *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, but he died before publishing the book. Sometime in the 1820s, however, a Basque scholar, Joaquín de Ferrer, secured a copy, and in 1829 he brought the memoir to print 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").

The Lieutenant Nun

Erauso became known as *la Monja Alférez*, "the Lieutenant Nun," a dual image that fascinated the public. In her memoir she recounts instances of her capability and valor in military combat in Peru and Chile. On one occasion, when her company's flag was captured, she rode off amidst the enemy forces and retrieved it, receiving serious wounds in the process, but also "killing and slaughtering more men than there are numbers."

In a 1625 petition to King Felipe IV of Spain for a yearly stipend, Erauso referred to her fifteen years as a soldier under the name Alonso Díaz Ramírez de Guzmán. She stated that she had endured "the discomforts of military service like the strongest man" and that she had shown "great courage and valor" in battle.

She further alluded to her "rectitude and rare purity," but "rectitude" hardly describes the brawling, gambling, thievery, and dueling in which she frequently engaged.

Erauso's dueling led to a tragedy. In the early 1620s, she was seconding a fellow soldier when both of the principals were wounded. She and the other second jumped into the fray. Since the sword-fight was conducted in the dark of night, she could not tell who her opponent was, but when the man fell, mortally wounded, and cried out, she realized that it was her older brother Captain Miguel de Erauso, under whose command she had served for several years without revealing her true identity to him.

Erauso was frank in her memoir in describing her numerous brawls. Quick-tempered, she readily drew her sword, sometimes with apparently little provocation but often with disastrous results. By her own account she killed over a dozen adversaries. She was arrested and thrown into jail on many occasions but always managed to escape with her life.

It was while Erauso was under arrest for murder that she revealed that she was a woman. She told her story to the sympathetic Bishop Agustín de Carvajal of Guamanga, Peru. Erauso expressed her willingness to be examined by other women to prove that she was a female. The bishop called for two elderly women to see her, and when they declared her a woman and an intact virgin, he arranged for her to stay in a convent while the account was verified, a process that took about three years.

Erauso then returned to Spain, where she petitioned for and received a military pension from the king. She also traveled to Rome and was received by Pope Urban VIII. When she told him of her military exploits--presented as in defense of the Catholic faith and the Spanish monarch--and of her verified status as a virgin, he granted her request to be allowed to continue to dress as a man.

Relations with Women

In her memoir Erauso stressed her chief virtues as a man--physical courage--and as a woman--virginity. While she did not stint at recounting transgressive acts of "manly" bravery such as fights resulting in murder, she was more oblique when referring to acts that were sexually transgressive.

At no point does Erauso speak of physical attraction to a man. She did, however, include several incidents that show her affection for women. Early in her American adventures she worked for a wealthy Lima merchant with whose two younger sisters-in-law she became "accustomed to frolicking." The merchant fired Erauso after discovering her reclining with her head in the lap of one of the sisters-in-law and running her hand up and down between the young woman's legs.

Erauso also had a falling-out with her brother over a woman. Captain Miguel de Erauso, delighted to meet a fellow Basque, took his disguised sister under his wing, befriended her, and brought her/him along when he visited his mistress. He became irate, however, when he learned that the young soldier was sneaking back to visit the mistress on his/her own. Predictably, a brawl ensued.

On several occasions Erauso was wooed by women whose families saw her as a good catch for their daughters. Erauso seems to have had no intention of attempting to marry another woman; rather, she exploited these situations to gain gifts and dowry before absconding. She complained of the ugliness of one prospective bride, noting that her "taste [had] always run to pretty faces."

Dramatizations of Her Life

A story as extraordinary as Erauso's invited dramatization. Since authors emphasized different ones of the multifarious aspects of her life--and sometimes added their own inventions--the image of her is far from consistent.

One of the earliest works, Juan Pérez de Montalbán's *La Monja Alférez* (1626), gives the protagonist Guzmán, a love interest, Doña Ana, who reciprocates Guzmán's feelings but does not know that "he" is a woman. When Guzmán learns that Doña Ana has been tricked into making love with another character, Diego, who was pretending to be Guzmán, he/she presses Diego to do the honorable thing by marrying Doña Ana. Guzmán, who has been so determined to keep her biological gender secret that she declared death preferable to discovery, finally relents when Diego balks at the marriage because of doubts about Doña Ana's chastity.

Diego promises to keep Guzmán's secret but reveals it in order to save her when she is sentenced to death for killing a man in self-defense. Guzmán thus loses both her secret and her love but not her life.

In other works Erauso is, in Sherry Velasco's term, "de-lesbianized." In his 1847 telling of Erauso's life entitled "The Nautico-Military Nun of Spain," Thomas De Quincey uses "sisterly love" as an explanation for Erauso's behavior with other women.

Carlos Cuello, in his 1866 *zarzuela* (popular operetta) *La Monja Alférez*, presents Guzmán as a heterosexual woman who flirts with another woman not just to maintain her masculine disguise but also to dispel rumors that "he" is gay. By the end of the piece Guzmán is re-identified as Catalina, who in a song-and-dance number with the stage direction "with charm and flirtation" declares herself "a gentle woman and lover."

Cinematic Versions of Her Life

Versions of Erauso's story have also been told in the cinema. Mexican director Emilio Gómez Murillo's *La Monja Alférez* (1944) was intended as a star vehicle for actress María Félix, whose "disguise" as a man was utterly unconvincing. Added to the story-line is a character named Juan, Catalina's childhood sweetheart who winds up sharing her adventures. It is he who provides the male attire that allows her to assume a new identity as Alonso; thus, he is in on the secret from the beginning. The film ends with a kiss between the lovers clearly heterosexual, although it causes some comic confusion to an onlooking character who does not realize that Alonso is really a woman.

In Javier Aguirre's 1986 film *La Monja Alférez*, which was subsidized by the Basque government, Erauso is portrayed as drawn to women from an early age, beginning with a close friendship with a fellow novice named Inés. It is the death of Inés that prompts Erauso to leave the convent. During her adventures in South America, she has romantic encounters with women, through which she comes to recognize her lesbianism. While in the Peruvian convent she falls ill with a fever, and in her delirium mistakes another nun for Inés, for whom she declares her love. The film ends tragically with Erauso alone in Mexico, remembering her first and true love, Inés.

Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things*

Lesbian director Sheila McLaughlin presents Erauso's story as a film-within-a-film in *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987). The contemporary story-line concerns Jo, a lesbian making a film about Erauso entitled *Catalina*, and her jealous partner Agatha, who fears that Jo may be attracted to men. The film *Catalina* takes certain liberties in recounting Erauso's life, including rewriting an incident to give it a lesbian slant.

In her memoir Erauso described rescuing María Dávalos from her husband, Pedro de Chavarría, who had discovered her with another man. When Erauso arrived on the scene, Chavarría had already murdered the man and was attempting to kill Dávalos. Erauso conveyed the terrified woman to the safety of a convent where Dávalos's widowed mother was living as a nun.

The memoir suggests no romantic motive for the rescue. In *Catalina*, however, the two women run away together at the end of the film. This reassures Agatha about Jo, thus resulting in a happy resolution for both female couples.

Erauso as Icon

Erauso has become more of an icon than an individual. At various times, including during the Franco regime (1939-1975), she has been portrayed as a heroic patriot for her military service to Spain; at others, she has been characterized as a law-breaking anti-hero. She has been cited as a "proto-feminist" and celebrated as a lesbian, but her story has sometimes been refashioned to make her asexual or even heterosexual.

The Basque government has claimed her as an ethnic heroine, sponsoring the publication of a Basque translation of her memoir in 1976.

She is also commemorated by the Colegio Público Catalina de Erauso, an elementary school and kindergarten, that stands on a street bearing her name in her hometown of San Sebastián. The school may seem a rather curious choice for a tribute to the transgressive Erauso, but perhaps it can be seen as yet another facet of the legend already composed of so many images.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.