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LIEUTENANT NUN

M E M O I R O F

A B A S Q U E

Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World  
T R A N S V E S T I T E

I N T H E N E W

W O R L D

Catalina de Erauso

Translated from the Spanish by  
Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto

Foreword by Marjorie Garber

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*for Robert and Rafael  
and for Carlos, in memoriam*

**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)*

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How *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* 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 *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* 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, *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* 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 *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* 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, *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* 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 *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* neither parent recognizes her. She is already someone else. As a story about emergent subjectivity, male or female, early modern or postmodern, Catalina de *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* Erauso's narrative is a literal description *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* of self-fashioning, in which, quite literally, clothes make the man.

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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, Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World a transvestism of rank or status as well as of gender. Catalina's payment from benefactors Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World 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 Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World 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 Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World 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 Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World 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 Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World playing a boy playing a girl. "Madam, undress you, and come now to bed," says Christopher Sly Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World 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 Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite

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in the New World 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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,”<sup>2</sup> a visitor reported of the cheeky young “page.” In an instance of literature accompanying Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World if not imitating 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.)<sup>3</sup> Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *La vida es sueño* (*Life Is a Dream*), a play dated around 1636, features a cross-dressed woman determined to avenge her own honor, in the tradition Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World 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 Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World as a Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World woman / Then I should have to kill you as a man would / In

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honourable service of Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World my honour.”<sup>4</sup> 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, Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World the pagan king of Sicily, declined to marry her but her father had her crucified. Where Joan Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World and Librada both differ signally from Catalina de Erauso, of course, is that neither ever tried to pass as a man.

## Lieutenant Nun Memoir Of A Basque Transvestite In The New World

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