

# Introduction

María Ignacia Rodríguez de Velasco y Osorio Barba (1778–1850). Known to history simply as “La Güera Rodríguez”—in English, “the Fair” or perhaps “Blonde” Rodríguez. A household name in Mexico yet barely known in the rest of the world. The witty beauty who allegedly charmed Simón Bolívar, Alexander von Humboldt, and Agustín de Iturbide. Banished from Mexico City for her part in a political intrigue. Involved in messy lawsuits with her first husband and then married twice more. The topic of malicious gossip as well as admiration during her lifetime. Later remembered in historical chronicles and in the press, as well as in novels, plays, comic books, movies, an opera, and a telenovela. Her fame exploded in 2010 during the bicentennial of the Grito de Dolores that initiated Mexico’s struggle for independence. That year saw revivals and reprints of earlier works as well as new representations in popular publications, radio and television programs, a corrido, blogs, and lectures and performances uploaded to YouTube. Since then she has continued to be a darling of popular culture. Yet, until now, she has not received the scholarly biography she so richly deserves.

La Güera Rodríguez has fascinated me ever since, fifty years ago, I read *Life in Mexico* (1843) by Fanny Calderón de la Barca, the Scottish wife of

Spain's first minister in republican Mexico. Her lively account of living in Mexico City during 1840 and 1841 mentions La Güera repeatedly because the two women became fast friends who shared many pleasurable times together. Fanny reported—among other intriguing anecdotes—that Humboldt had pronounced La Güera the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.<sup>1</sup> Later I read the biographical novel by Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, *La Güera Rodríguez* (1949), which painted an unforgettable portrait of “one of the most brilliant figures” in Mexican history, a clever and rebellious woman who defied many conventions of the day.<sup>2</sup> And when, as a young graduate student, I stumbled upon several documents about her in the archives, I published a long excerpt from her 1802 divorce suit with her first husband and filed my notes away for future use.<sup>3</sup> Through all these years my well-worn copies of *Life in Mexico* and *La Güera Rodríguez* had an honored place on my bookshelf. So, when I started this project, I felt that I was going back to an old friend, one of the few Mexican women who left enough of a documentary trace for a solid biography, one whose life offered a unique window into the neglected social history of her day and who broke so many “rules” that we have to question whether those rules existed outside of our deeply ingrained stereotypes.

Yet as I looked at what had been written about La Güera Rodríguez over the past few decades, I barely recognized her. She had gone from playing a minor role in the independence movement to becoming a major protagonist. In the twentieth century not a single statue, avenue, or school was named for her—the recognition given several other heroines. Neither was she part of the official history taught to Mexican schoolchildren and enshrined in the exhibits at the Museum of National History.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, by 2010 posters announcing the play and opera bearing her name were all over Mexico City. When her glamorous image was paraded during street processions commemorating the bicentennial, bystanders immediately recognized her as one of Mexico's beloved patriots.<sup>5</sup> The Museo de la Mujer, a museum of Mexican women's history that opened in 2011, placed her as one of only four women in the room of “insurgent women,” alongside the famous Leona Vicario, Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez (La Corregidora), and Mariana Rodríguez del Toro de Lazarín.<sup>6</sup> And Mexican writers made increasingly outlandish claims: “The Mother of the Patria” who as Iturbide's “adviser” was “the most politically powerful woman in

the entire history of Mexico.” “It is probable that without her, Mexico’s independence never would have been consummated.”<sup>7</sup> Some authors blithely asserted that she had affairs with many men, including Bolívar, Humboldt, and Iturbide. She was dubbed “a sex addict,” “the Marilyn Monroe of her day,” and even “one of the ten most famous prostitutes in history.”<sup>8</sup>

At this point I realized that her afterlife in the 170 years since her death was worth studying in its own right. As I followed her rise from relative obscurity to fame, I saw her change before my very eyes, from a Proper Aristocratic Lady, to a Naughty Patriot Finally Tamed by a Man, to a Wise Woman, to a Feminist, and, finally, to a Fully Liberated Heroine. In trying to find the real Güera Rodríguez, I discovered that much of what I thought I knew about her was mistaken. And I noticed that once a false detail appeared it was subsequently repeated as if true in later works—sometimes even those written by scholars.

I therefore decided to expand the focus of my research from my initial attempt to write the definitive biography of doña María Ignacia Rodríguez—in any case an impossible task, given the lacunae in the documentation—to analyzing her many representations in historical, literary, and artistic narratives that variously labeled her as “remarkable,” “magnificent and extraordinary,” “astute,” “mischievous,” “seductive,” “libertine,” “depraved,” “docile,” a “nymphomaniac,” and a “feminist.” As I learned, she has been the subject of so many myths that it is exceedingly difficult to disentangle the woman from the legend.

I have nonetheless tried to separate fact from fiction. The first part of this book presents what I have been able to document about her life, much of it missing from—or distorted by—later representations. The picture that emerges is of a beautiful, vivacious socialite who confronted many vicissitudes with great resilience, but who did not defy the social norms of her day or play a central role in the struggle for independence. Yet even when shorn of the many myths that have clouded our vision, her true story is so fascinating that it does not need embellishment. Along with moments of high drama, comedy, and tragedy, it provides insight into one woman’s life during a period for which we have few biographies. And it confirms the findings of historians who have questioned many stereotypes about women and gender in the late colonial and early republican periods.<sup>9</sup>

The second part of the book explores her journey after death, beginning with her disappearance from Mexican arts and letters in the second half of the nineteenth century and continuing through her resurrection and transformation in the twentieth century until, by the bicentennial of 2010, she had become an iconic figure. By examining these representations in chronological order, I show how her portrayal shifted over time and how each of her new identities reflected the cultural context and ideology of the narrators who recounted her tale with gusto. I also consider why she has exerted such a magnetic hold on generations of Mexicans.

Although the two sections of the book may be read independently, each one informs the other. The accounts published long after her death provided hypotheses for me to test as I pieced together her life story, and it, in turn, allowed me to determine which parts of the posthumous accounts were fictional. For example: Did she really have love affairs with Bolívar, Humboldt, and Iturbide? Was she really the author of the Plan de Iguala that ushered in Mexican independence? Was she really the model that the famous sculptor Manuel Tolsá used for the Virgen de los Dolores in Mexico City's famed La Profesa church? It turns out that none of these statements—nor many others—can be corroborated with historical documents, and some are demonstrably false. By tracing the emergence of falsehoods that became part of La Güera's legend, I demonstrate how, gradually, her mythical personage was created.

I could not have written this book forty-five years ago, when I began collecting information about doña María Ignacia Rodríguez. I was part of a generation of social historians that reacted against studying the elites to focus instead on the lower classes. I suppose I have mellowed with time. And I have been inspired by the resurgence of scholarly interest in the genre of biography, which has shown how much we can learn about myriad subjects from the detailed study of an individual life.<sup>10</sup> I have also become more self-conscious about the historian's craft and the difficulty of freeing ourselves from stereotypes and myths. In thinking about this problem, I have benefited from reading numerous works that examine the changing interpretations of historical figures.<sup>11</sup> By analyzing historical memory as distinct from what actually happened, these works reveal how present-day concerns shape the way we represent—and misrepresent—the past.

This book thus serves as a meditation on the construction of history. The successive transformations of La Güera Rodríguez highlight the large gap between memory and history, for her persona in popular culture is a far cry from the woman who lived long ago. It also shows that historical memory is never definitive and final, for the stories we tell about the past are constantly refashioned to reflect changing ideas about gender, race, class, politics, and nation. And it reminds us of the need to evaluate historical narratives carefully by paying close attention to who created each text, when, on the basis of what sources, and for what purpose. My hope is that this study of both the woman and the legend will help us sharpen our skills as critical readers who are not taken in by false facts and apocryphal stories.