

Mutant Identities in the Middle Ages

Anonymous

2018

“I am *hic [he], et haec [and she], et hoc [and it]*. I declare myself, I am a man, I am a woman, I am a third party that is neither one nor the other, nor is it clear which of these things it is. I am the land of those who, like a horrendous and strange monster, consider me sinister and bad omen, let everyone who has looked at me know that it is another me, if that person lives feminised.” – Moral Emblems, Sebastian de Covarrubias Orozco, 1610

We will never know how many people during the Middle Ages decided to defy all the social, political and religious structures of the time to live with identities contrary to the gender assigned to them at birth. We are talking about people assigned women who adopted masculine roles and clothing to live and develop certain professions that were reserved for men, but also about those who were assigned men who did the same in feminine worlds. Or people who inhabited certain parts of both worlds. Recovering these stories, naming them, contributes to creating our history; the one that we may never write in capital letters but in which many of us can recognize ourselves and feel a little more at home.

These types of identity practices have existed for millennia. A few years ago a tomb was found in a neighborhood of Prague (Czech Republic) belonging to a person who lived around 2900–2500 BC. The curious thing about this finding is that this person – identified, according to the researchers’ cis-sexist view, as a man – was buried as women usually were [*ed. – in that place and time*]. Their head was facing east and their body was surrounded by household utensils. There is not a single one of the objects that generally accompanied men, such as weapons, stone battle axes and flint knives.

In ancient times homosexual knowledge and practices were accepted. There are plenty of stories and mythologies that show that it was a known and accepted social phenomenon. The Middle Ages mark a point of inflection with no turning back. The rise and imposition through a true system of terror of the Catholic Church marks a rather dark period in our history. We have all heard of the witch hunts, of the *Autos-da-Fé* [*ed. – “acts of faith”: public penance rituals for heresy*], of the bonfires where the different, the “deviant”, were tortured and murdered. These practices of destruction and death were obviously replicated in the continents plundered, destroyed and massacred by the European colonizers.

The advent of class divisions, the acquisition of wealth and power, and property ownership fueled a transition to patriarchal rule in which the puzzling and singular had no place. The “dictum of silence” established by Christian morality conceptualized sex between people of the same sex

as sodomy (*peccatum illud horribile inter christianos non nominandum* [ed. – “that horrible crime not to be named among Christians”; an ultimate heresy rendered as cultural death]), which generated the subsequent prohibition through personalized and civil laws. The mere act of publishing novels in which the central theme was the universe of sodomy, sexual deviation, homosexuality, intersexuality, was a real scandal, despite the fact that many of these stories were often presented with grotesquely negative overtones, and always in connection with the underworld, delinquency, depravity, crime and perversion. The Catholic Church provided much of the impetus for defining and eradicating sexual deviance, but it wasn't the sin itself that frightened church officials; rather, Church officials feared the negative publicity created by scandals because such scandals diminished their authority and prestige.

It is curious and contradictory that within the same Catholic doctrine there are several stories such as that of Saint Wilfrida, a princess of Portugal who did not want to get married despite the fact that her father wanted to force her to do so. She prayed, begging for all her beauty to be removed and her prayers were heard; God gave her a lush beard and attributes historically associated with masculinity. Regarding Saint Onofre, a local legend tells in Cappadocia, that she was a beautiful widow; bothered by the sexual advances of the men in the area, she prayed to become a man. The next morning she woke up with a thick beard covering her face.

In the mid-16th century, a mestizo person [ed. – *i.e. mixed European and non-European*] was born who at some point in their life took the name of Eleno de Céspedes. They lived in different cities of the [Iberian] Peninsula and worked various trades such as tailoring, hosiery (specific to women), herding, farming and surgery (specific only to men). During their life they had spent some time in jail for homosexuality. Despite the fact that for a long time, the people who knew them accepted that Céspedes was a man and a woman at the same time, the fact that they married another woman was not seen favorably by some and was denounced to the court of the Holy Inquisition.. During the trial, they testified that, during their first labor, due to their efforts, a membrane tore and a penis sprouted; the same penis that, while incarcerated, they stated that they had to cut off little by little due to a disease. Eleno is accused of dealing with the devil for having managed to deceive the doctors and surgeons who certified that they had the genitals expected by the doctors in order to marry a woman named María del Caño. Found guilty of having mocked the sacrament of marriage, of implanting an artificial member and corrupting with it the body of his former wife (and of other women, all being told), they were forced to parade with a crown of thorns and dressed in penance in an *Auto-de-Fé* in Toledo, sentenced to two hundred lashes and ten years in prison in a hospital curing the sick without pay and of course, abandoning their self-determination of dress.

In the humble neighborhood of Cheapside (London), a person known as Eleanor worked as a prostitute. One day at work, she is caught by the authorities with her client while they were having sex. Eleanor was locked up in the city jail where they discover to their surprise that in the official documents she was John Rykener and that her genitals were not what they expected. In her trial statement, Eleanor recounts how she entered the world of prostitution and explains that she had relationships with all kinds of men, including priests, monks and even students, but also slept with women including nuns and married wives (she said the sexual encounters with women were free). During her confession, she explained how in her past she had been the wife of a man and that she had carried out different jobs typical of women, such as embroidery or as a waiter in different taverns. Even during a good part of the judicial process where her origins came to light, Eleanor continued to be recognized in her experience, since it is indicated that

she was brought before the court dressed ‘*ut cum muliere*’, that is, as a woman. There are similar cases in other parts of Europe. Another of the stories is that of Rolandino/Rolandina Ranchaia, a prostitute from the mid-14th century who worked in the city of Venice. Despite the fact that in her official documents she was listed as a man and this was certified by her marriage to a person assigned a woman at birth, it is thought that she had relationships with numerous men without any of them noticing. Ranchaia was captured and executed at the stake.

The importance of the Church in controlling the sexuality of society in the Middle Ages and in the modern age is reflected in the fact that the majority of these cases were tried in ecclesiastical courts, often initiating severe trials based on simple rumours, false accusations or self-interested confessions. This control was even more repressive over women, since the Church always had that unstoppable obsession to control their desire and their sexuality, which is why reports about defamatory behavior of women were much more frequent than about men. It is for this reason that Eleanor was surely brought to court as a woman, and not as a man, since it would be easier for people to accuse her of any type of crime.

In the fifteenth century, Margarida Borrás is executed by hanging for being a woman who had been named Miguel at the time of her birth. Margarida had been “in many houses in Valencia” in women’s clothes. As soon as this was discovered, she was denounced, imprisoned and tortured by the Cort de Governació or by the Criminal Justice (the Inquisition did not arrive in Valencia until 1484). Margarida was forced to wear men’s clothes, with shorts, so that her genitals would also be exposed when she was hanged.

Another case is that of Catalina de Erauso, whom we know as the “Lieutenant Nun”, who escaped from the convent in which he was confined, he dressed as a man so as not to be recognized and to be able to continue his existence without being caught. He maintained his identity as Francisco Loyola [*ed. – as well as Antonio de Erauso*] all his life and only at the end did he confess that he had escaped and that he was designated female at birth. However, we do not like this story so much, because he participated in what some Afro-descendant comrades have called colonial robbery and we are not proud of this.¹

In many of the class battles that took place in Europe during the feudal era, and later in the era of industrial capitalism, at various times the leaders of these rebellions were people who today could be described as transvestites or transsexuals. [*ed. – see A New Luddite Rebellion*].

One of the most famous stories is that of Joan of Arc, an illiterate peasant teenager who had visions that prompted her to join the army of the King of France and recover the territories occupied by the English as a result of the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453). The young maiden went to Chinon, where the court of Charles VII was located, equipped with armor and carrying a banner, led the troops and forced the English to lift the siege of Orleans, defeated the British general Talbot in Patay and, that same year, Charles VII was crowned king in Reims, on July 17, 1429. A year later, and after the failure of the offensive against Paris, she was taken prisoner and handed over to the English, who accused her of heresy and sentenced her to die at the stake. On May 30, 1431, she was tied to a stake and burned to death in the Old Market Square of Rouen, northwestern France, and her ashes were thrown into the Seine River.

¹ ed. – Like many Basques, he set out for the so-called ‘New World’, serving as merchant, settler, soldier and petty criminal in lands colonists went on to name Venezuela, Ecuador (where he held at least three Afro-descendent slaves), Peru, Chile (where he partook of the massacre of the Mapuche – see Return Fire vol.3 pg59 – and even among the other soldiers his cruelty to them was noted during the scorched-earth campaign), Mexico... He even petitioned the Spanish Crown for reward for his “account of merits and services” in their overseas conquests.

Joan of Arc is not the only case. In 1645, in Montpellier, France, there was a revolt started by women that was led by a person known as La Branlaire (a virago, a masculine woman they called her in her day).

For now, we leave this topic here, with the certainty that there have always been people who have challenged the structure of sex and gender long before anyone talked about sex-gender systems and that people who live according to gender identities that do not correspond to the imposed biology and are not part of a trend of postmodern feminism and transfeminism.

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First published in Jauría #3. Translated for Return Fire vol.6 chap.4 (summer 2022). To read the articles referenced throughout this text in [square brackets], PDFs of Return Fire and related publications can be read, downloaded and printed by visiting returnfire.noblogs.org or emailing returnfire@riseup.net

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