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HST 336

2 Oct. 2016

Beyond Male and Female: A Look into Early Medieval Gender

When Gregory of Tours wrote Book 10, Chapter 15 of his *History of the Franks*, he shed light on an often ignored part of history: gender. His account of a power struggle in a nunnery between the Merovingian nun Chrodiel and her nameless abbess in 590 CE¹, while dramatic in its own right, featured a climax that asks far more questions than it answers. There, Gregory almost casually references an individual which would be a subject of endless controversy today: a woman who was born as a male. While Chrodiel attempted to use this anonymous “eunuch” as a reason why the current abbess is corrupt, Gregory, an early Roman Catholic bishop of Tours, does not appear to have as strong of a reaction against the eunuch as Chrodiel, only seeming to be interested if there was any misconduct between this individual and the abbess. Compared to the modern day Catholic Church, which the current Pope has openly condemned the concept of transgenderism, the mere existence of a cross-dressing eunuch seems like a significant deviation from expectations of modern readers, who assume that medieval Europe was an age of faith and a land of devout Christians. Gregory’s bland, understated reporting of this eunuch fundamentally calls into question how exactly early medieval society, especially the church, viewed gender and gender expression.

¹Partner, Nancy F., “No Sex, No Gender” *Speculum* 68, no 2 (Aug. 1993): 419

Book 10, Chapter 15 of the *History of the Franks* is but a single chapter of a single book, which is a much broader look into the full history of the Frankish people up to the lifetime of its author, Saint-Bishop Gregory of Tours. Gregory was born to a patrician Gallo-Roman family² in 539 CE, started to write his *History of the Franks* two years after becoming a bishop in 575 CE, and died in 594 CE.³ *History of the Franks* was a highly unusual work for the time period; most manuscripts of the early medieval period focused exclusively on religious matters, as almost the entire literate population of Western Europe were involved with the Church in some capacity. While Gregory's manuscript was certainly a religious text firstly, (Historian Nancy Partner even goes on to claim that his accounts of temporal society were almost incidental to his attempt to chronicalize the spiritual history of the Franks)⁴, it offers one of the first, if not the first, written Western European accounts of secular history since the fall of Rome. It also serves as, in a way, his own biography; the last four books increasingly become about himself and his own personal role in Frankish society as the most influential Bishop in Francia.⁵

Tours was the “religious metropolis” of the Christian faith in Francia;⁶ Tours uniquely marked the main point of travel between the recently converted Frankish north and solidly Chalcedonian Gallo-Roman south. In addition, St. Martin, perhaps one of the most influential saints of the early medieval period and the chief architect of the conversion of Gaul, was the

² Brehaut, Earnest, “Introduction” in Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Ernest Brehaut (extended selections), *Records of Civilization 2*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916)

³ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*. (Fordham: Fordham University, 1997), <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/gregory-hist.asp#book10>

⁴ Partner, Nancy, “No Sex, No Gender”, 420

⁵ Brehaut, Earnest, “Introduction”

⁶ Brehaut, Earnest, “Introduction”

bishop of the Tours diocese. A cult surrounding St. Martin dominated the spiritual community, and made it the most holy city in all of Francia, and an important pilgrimage site.⁷

Book 10, Chapter 15 deals with a notable incident where Chrodiel, a member of the ruling Merovingian dynasty who had become a nun, was engaged in a power struggle against the abbess of the nunnery that she resided in. Initially, she had gathered a force of “murderers, sorcerers, adulterers, run-away slaves and men guilty of all other crimes” to attack the monastery at Poitier directly and capture the abbess.⁸ After facing initial setbacks, Chrodiel’s mercenaries eventually capture the abbess, where upon they locked her up at a nearby church. The local bishop disputed the kidnapping of the abbess, especially as the events happened only “seven days before Easter”. Further drama between both Chrodiel and those who supported the abbess grew violent after the holiday passed.⁹ The local area was such in disorder, that the King demanded a council of local religious figures, including Gregory himself, to arbitrate the two factions.

At the actual trial, Chrodiel claimed the current abbess was corrupt, with the specific charge of “that [the abbess] had a man in the monastery who wore woman's clothes and was treated as a woman although he had been very clearly shown to be a man, and that he was in constant attendance on the abbess herself”.¹⁰ Gregory, seemingly only interested if this person had an improper relationship with the abbess rather than the specifics of the person’s gender situation, seemed to readily accept their testimony that “[they were] impotent” and “lived more

⁷ Brehaut, Earnest, “Introduction”

⁸ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

⁹ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

¹⁰ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

than forty miles from the city of Poitiers”.¹¹ Gregory was ready to declare the abbess not guilty, but Chrodiel was determined to pin the abbess as an impious sinner. She furiously declared, “What holiness is there in this abbess who makes men eunuchs and orders them to live with her as if she were an empress”[?]”¹² Immediately afterwards, the court physician intervened, and produced his own testimony on the matter¹³:

This man when he was a child was diseased in the thigh and was so ill that his life was despaired of; his mother went to the holy Radegunda to request that he should have some attention. But she called me and bade me give what assistance I could. Then I castrated him in the way I had once seen physicians do in Constantinople, and restored the boy in good health to his sorrowing mother; I am sure the abbess knows nothing of this matter.

At this point, the abbess was cleared of any charges relating to this mysterious person, although Chrodiel still yet attempted to press further charges against the abbess, which were presented in the next chapter.

When Gregory wrote this chapter of the *History of the Franks*, it is clear that he had a specific interest in writing about this incident. As a high-ranking member of the Roman Church, his main focus was describing the ecclesiastical irregularities that was going on between the two factions, and to resolve them while confirming the legitimacy of the Church’s spiritual authority. Because of this, the main body of the text glosses over a lot of the context of the dispute, such as the root cause of Chrodiel’s discontent with the abbess (although that can easily be inferred as simply being a power struggle between the two women), or the exact manner of the charges besides those relating to the “eunuch”. Since the abbess was ultimately found to be not guilty, it

¹¹ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

¹² Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

¹³ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

can be assumed that Gregory did not want to undermine her, and by extension the Church's, legitimacy by preserving what comes out to be slander. Therefore, Gregory's writing portrays Chrodiel in an extremely negative light, as to be expected. However, while Gregory could have easily extended this negative portrayal towards the nameless "eunuch", he notably portrays them in an at least neutral way, if not slightly sympathetic for being stuck in the crossfire between the two factions. That being said, Gregory (and everyone else at the court, although we cannot be 100% positive that everything was perfectly transcribed by Gregory) consistently uses masculine pronouns when referring to this person who has clearly attempted to present as female to the court. This apparent indifference of "the eunuch" as a person not born as a woman living as a woman, although not necessarily of their gender identity itself, is a very interesting insight into at least Gregory's worldview, if not the Church as a whole.

Likewise, as the *History of the Franks* was quite literally named, the books primarily dealt with the history of the Frankish people. As very few people were literate during the early medieval period, and those who were literate were mostly either church officials or aristocrats, there was a very limited readership available. Therefore, while this chapter does get into detail of both the Church and the aristocracy, via the nunnery/the council of bishops and Chrodiel/the king respectively, the commoners were left out almost entirely. The high clergy and the nobility did not see commoners as relevant voices, and they are consistently left out of almost all primary sources of the period. Despite being the focus of the climax of the chapter, "the eunuch" is intentionally left nameless, nor is any of their actual words preserved. Furthermore, no detail is given into how this individual lives, if there is a tradition of having impotent male-at-birth individuals living as women in Frankish society, or really any sort of actual context of why this person even exists at all. While it may be possible that Gregory simply assumed his

contemporaries would already know such context and thus felt it frivolous to record it, it is also possible that it was an intentional omission, although for exactly what purpose being lost to history. One possible reason for an intentional omission is that perhaps Gregory simply was too focused on trying to resolve the issue of the civil war in the nunnery; whatever sins the eunuch falls under simply flew under his radar as irrelevant to the bigger issue at hand. Another possible reason is that it simply didn't faze him; it is very possible that, under his role of receiving confession, that he has heard and possibly even seen worse, and thus considered it non-notable. In general, this lack of recording makes "the eunuch" even more of an anomaly to modern observers, as it leaves us to essentially guesswork to piece all the clues together.

The main conclusion to draw from this chapter is that "the eunuch" exists at all and was mentioned by one of the most influential members of the Frankish clergy, which is a major stepping-stone into questioning the history of gender identity in Western Europe. As previously mentioned, while Gregory seems to have some reservations in calling this person a she, it cannot be stressed enough how atypical it is to a modern observer how a bishop of the Roman Church shows complete indifference to someone living an atypical gender role. The current pope, Pope Francis, compared even the teaching of gender identity to a "war on marriage", and said transgenderism "goes against nature".¹⁴ At one point, he even directly compared transgenderism as being as much of a threat to human existence as nuclear weapons!¹⁵ Gregory's much more moderate stance towards this "eunuch" is downright astonishing under this context. As a bishop, Gregory has been through extensive theological study, and in the introduction of Book I,

¹⁴ Newsome, John, "Pope Warns of 'Ideological Colonization' in Transgender Teachings" (CNN, 2016) <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/02/world/pope-transgender-comments/>

¹⁵ Saul, Heather, "Pope Francis Compares Arguments for Transgender Rights to Nuclear Arms Race (The Independent, 2015) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/pope-francis-compares-arguments-for-transgender-rights-to-nuclear-arms-race-10061223.html>

Gregory values and claims to uphold the standard Roman Catholic dogma against heretical theology.¹⁶ Yet, Gregory's account lacks any of the vitriolic condemnation which the current pope is very liberal with despite his reputation of being a reformist. Could this imply that the early Church, if not Frankish society as a whole, was more accepting of alternative gender lifestyles than even today? It's hard to say for sure, due to the aforementioned gaps in the historic record, but it is a question worth investigating. Nancy Partner, a historian who has looked further into detail about this "eunuch", hypothesized that "this [person] went quietly home to [their] 'woman's work' in the village, to a few crude insults but not violence or ostracism, to occupy some understood place at the social margin of kin and neighbors: a social facsimile of a woman".¹⁷ Confirming or denying this hypothesis is beyond my limited understanding of the period, although I can certainly say that I would have never considered the possibility of Frankish society being this accommodating towards genderqueer individuals if Gregory had not preserved even the limited information he did on this individual.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that, regardless of what Gregory views of the matter, Chrodiel in fact did make an issue over the eunuch. Although her initial argument against the abbess was breaking chastity with the eunuch, when that was disproven, she did attack the abbess on subverting what could be considered traditional gender roles. Her accusation, "What holiness is there in this abbess who makes men eunuchs and orders them to live with her as if she were an empress", seems to imply the belief that at least she considered something unnatural about the eunuch's relationship with the abbess.¹⁸ Most of the vitriol, however, does seem to be pointed at the abbess rather than the eunuch. The abbess, by allegedly

¹⁶ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

¹⁷ Partner, Nancy F., "No Sex, No Gender" *Speculum* 68, no 2 (Aug. 1993): 421-422

¹⁸ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

having a man turned into a eunuch, is disrupting the traditional gender roles of both the Roman church and of Frankish society. Eunuchs, as a concept, was a cultural practice of the Greeks and the Eastern churches, and was much less common in the west. The court physician, in his testimony, even mentioned he had to go to Constantinople in order to learn the procedure. If there was no native Frankish tradition of castration, it potentially puts historical doubt in how widespread this practice could have been. However, while if eunuchs at the time were considered men or a sort of third sex is up for historical debate, they certainly did not usually consider themselves, nor dressed as, women. In fact, Gregory's described eunuch is a historical anomaly in that regards. Perhaps, the eunuch was a special case of physical castration combined with an otherwise Frankish tradition of certain male-at-birth living as female? The lack of information makes it impossible to discern.

Thusly, the existence of this individual known to history as simply (and likely erroneously) as "the eunuch" does, indeed, raise fascinating questions the role of gender and gender identity in early medieval Europe. It is unfortunate how little information exists on this individual, for it limits how far we can conclude before stepping into the realm of speculation. Despite a current perception that non-traditional gender expression is a 21st century phenomenon, Gregory's work shows that non-traditional gender expression in Western Europe is an ancient tradition, much like homosexuality. Gregory's matter-of-fact recollection of the eunuch might indicate that he reviewed it as a normal facet of Frankish life, and that the Church itself did not feel the need to comment or condemn the practice, if they did at all. Ultimately, what Gregory does is give the modern world some glimpses into ancient transgender expression, and how it was not new nor always a cause for saber-rattling. This is in opposition to the contemporary Church, which views transgender expression as a modern phenomenon, and a fundamental attack

on “traditional” family life. Resultantly, it’s total opposition to non-binary gender expression does not match the priorities of the early Church, an institution which was in theology much more aggressive against what it did view as corrupting influences, such as Arians and pagans. Perhaps the modern Church would benefit from looking at the example of Gregory’s indifference, rather than engaging in kulturkampf over the issue of gender expression which only serves to alienate those it condemns.