

The Case of Rolandina Ronchaia, a 14th-century transwoman?

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In 1355 the “Lords of the Night,” the Venetian criminal tribunal charged with investigating sexual offences and other disorders, interrogated a person named as Rolandino Ronchaia but who evidently preferred to be called Rolandina. As the record of examination indicates, Ronchaia had long dressed, acted, and had sex as a woman.

As we have (as yet) been unable to access the original record in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia [Archives of the City of Venice],¹ this translation is based on a number of versions of this record in circulation:

- *An unpublished Latin transcription of the record kindly provided by Alan Stahl.*
- *Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller’s Latin transcription of the record in Einführung in die Historiographie der Homosexualitäten (Edition diskord, 1999), 132-34.*
- *Giovanni Dall’Orto’s Italian translation of the original record, “Un transessuale del 1354,” Lotta Continua, 10 Apr 1981, 11-13, accessed on Dall’Orto’s [Facebook page](#).*
- *Alexander Baldassano – in his 2017 PhD thesis from the CUNY Graduate Centre, “[Bodies of Resistance](#)”, 235-49 – also translated passages from Hergemöller’s transcription which we have used as a resource to check against ours, though our translation is independent.*

These versions of the record differ from one another in various ways, likely due to illegibility from damage to parts of the manuscript. We have chosen what we think is the most likely reading with discussion of variants in the footnotes.

This record was written by those who were both hostile to and uncomprehending of Ronchaia. A translation challenge of rendering this document from Latin to English is the use of pronouns. Though it seems as if Ronchaia identified as a woman and would prefer, if living in the 21st century and speaking English, to use “she/her,” the record itself is somewhat inconsistent on pronoun use but almost always uses masculine pronouns. Thus the translation below tries to convey what the document’s scribe likely intended, to reproduce as faithfully as a translation can what the document says (which is a different task than conveying what Ronchaia felt about the matter). As the gender of pronouns in English and Latin work differently,² we have employed some textual

¹ Signori di Notte [Lords of the Night], criminal register 6, folio 64r. The Archives have been closed or at reduced service due to the pandemic and we have not been able to acquire an image or visit the archive in person.

² Latin uses many fewer personal pronouns than modern English; verbs, for instance, are often not preceded by a pronoun, and possessive pronouns match the gender of the object rather than the subject/person. Even when the pronoun did reflect the person’s gender, in this document it is often abbreviated in a way that obscures the gender, as for instance the abbreviation ipsm, which could be either ipsum [him] or ipsam [her]. As these abbreviations were standard, there is no reason to think the scribe was being intentionally ambiguous (indeed, as

*signposts. When the pronoun for Ronchaia is clear in Latin, it is translated by he/his or she/her as appropriate and **bolded**. Often, however, in translating from Latin to English the translator must supply the pronouns, which we have done in square brackets, e.g. [he].*

Rolandino Ronchaia, who makes a living in the Rialto selling this and that,³ suspected of the sodomitical sin, was led into the torture chamber before the Lords of the Night and interrogated to tell the truth about the evil things **he** did committing [his] sin. Immediately, without any torture, [he] said and confessed that it is now ten years and more since **he** accepted and married a young woman⁴ as [his] wife, with whom [he] stayed some time. Yet [he] never had sexual intercourse with her nor any other woman, because [he] never had any sexual appetite and could never get an erection. This wife left **him** and died at the time of the mortality.⁵ **He himself** went to the city of Padua to stay with a mason, [his] relative.⁶ And because [he] had a feminine face, voice, and gestures, even though [he] did not have the orifice of a woman and had a penis and testicles in a man's fashion, many thought [him] to be female as outward appearance suggested, and [he] heard often many people saying, "**she** is a woman," making reference to the same Rolandino.

Finally, on a certain night while [he] was in bed in the mason's house, a man who was staying in the house, thinking [him] to be a woman, with the intention of having sex with [him] as a woman, entered into the bed next to [him], took hold of **him**, and began to kiss [him] and hug [him] and fondle [his] breasts, which [he] had in women's fashion,⁷ and climbed on [his] body. The said Rolandino took the woman's part and, wishing to be thought a woman, hid [his] own penis and took the man's penis and put it in the rear, where the said man ejaculated and, when he was finished, left [him]. And so in that fashion [he] was with two other men in Padua, the men thinking [him] to be a woman.

Roisin Cossar has determined, some contemporary Venetian scribes only used the abbreviation ipsm for the masculine, spelling out the less commonly used feminine form ipsam). Thus male pronouns are supplied here rather than they/them or she/her to reflect that, as most of the time when the gender of the scribe's pronoun is explicit it is male and we believe that was the intention of the scribe (though, of course, that remains uncertain). Twice, however, the scribe used "she" or "her" in relation to Ronchaia, as bolded in the text.

³ Could be "eggs and other things": Hergemöller has "omnia vel alia"; Stahl has "ova et alia"; Dall'Orto transcribes the Latin in a footnote as "ona et alia," probably an error for "ova et alia."

⁴ The reading of this word is uncertain: Stahl has *nivonem* for *nipotem*, niece or cousin; preferred here is Hergemöller's reading of *iuvenem*, youth, which, as Baldassano points out (235), is a word more likely to be used for a youthful man than woman. This is possibly another instance, Baldassano speculates, of gender-bending ("Bodies of Resistance," 236).

⁵ I.e. the Black Death, which hit Venice in 1348.

⁶ Hergemöller transcribes this as *macone*; Dall'Orto translates it into Italian as "Massone" – both forms of the trade of mason. Stahl transcribes it as *Mazono*, which he perhaps understands as a surname, though it was also one of the variant Latin forms for the occupational term mason. In another variation, Baldassano translates this as a placename, *Macon* (in France?), held here to be unlikely.

⁷ "quas habet ad modum femine": unclear if this meant that Ronchaia had breasts clothed in a bodice as a woman's were or had breasts like a woman's.

After that [he] came to Venice and both because [he] had been with men as a woman, taking the role of a woman, and because also [he] outwardly appeared by [his] gestures to be a woman, the word spread in such a way that everyone thought [him] a woman, even though [he] wore men's clothes, and many called **her** Rolandina. And right away [he] was used in bed like the prostitutes of the Rialto and went to the brothels with them, always hiding [his] penis so that no one ever saw it, and [he] manifestly presented [himself] as a woman. And because of this [he] was asked to have sex with many, innumerable men here in Venice, doing the act with many in [his] own house and with others elsewhere at their request, all thinking [him] to be a woman. They were deceived in this way: when the men were on top of [his] body, as far as possible [he] hid [his] penis and took hold of the penis of the man who was having sex with **him**, and put it in the rear, and stayed with them while they ejaculated sperm, giving them all the delights as prostitutes do with men. [He] persevered in this sin for seven years and more.

Asked if anyone committing that act with **him** saw [his] penis, [he] answered no. Asked whether [his] own penis became erect while [he] was with those men, [he] said no. Asked why [he] committed that sin, [he] answered to earn a little money.⁸

Afterward, Rolandino was put to torture at the Lords' command, and interrogated to better speak the truth. And when [he] would not say anything other than what [he] said above, [he] was given a *sachata* [a whipping?]. When that was done [he] did not say anything other than what is written above.

Afterward, on 28 March, before the illustrious lord doge, Rolandino was presented and all that was written above was read aloud. Persevering in [his] confession, [he] affirmed [his] words as spoken and written above.

Note that on 28 March 1355, by lord Giovanni-Nicola Rosso, lord Daniele Cornario, the third judge being absent, Rolandino was sentenced to be burned until death.

Classroom Discussion/Activity Possibilities

1. Compare this document with two other records of interrogation of medieval people charged with gender transgressions:

- John/Eleanor Rykener from late fourteenth-century England (translation of record available online: Paul Halsall, "The Questioning of John Rykener, A Male Cross-Dressing

⁸ This phrase has been transcribed in three very different ways. Here we prefer Dall'Orto's modern Italian translation as it makes the most sense. His translation is from an independent transcription, presumably his own; he translates the phrase as "per guadagnare un poco di denaro" [to earn a little money, *pecuniam*]. The other transcriptions also have a word starting with "pe*" but diverge otherwise: Stahl's Latin transcription has "respondit interuentu alicuius peccamine" [responded by the intervention of the venal fault of another?]. Hergemöller's version reads it as "respondit *ne inventum aliud pertinere*" – the asterisks indicating an uncertain reading; Baldassano translates that as "responded *nothing else relevant found*."

Prostitute, 1395," *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*,
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1395rykener.asp> (1998; accessed 30 Nov. 2020).

- Katherina Hetzeldorfer from fifteenth-century Nuremberg in the Holy Roman Empire (translation available in Helmut Puff, "Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (1477)," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 1 (2000): 61–62, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-30-1-41>)

Further Reading:

Judith M. Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (2000): 1–24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704629>

David Lorenzo Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Interrogation of a Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 4 (1995): 459–65, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-4-459>.

Ruth Karras and Tom Linkinen, "John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited," in *Founding Feminisms: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*, ed. L. E. Doggett and D. E. O'Sullivan (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016), 111–21, <http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/91231>.

Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, 3rd Edition (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

Helmut Puff, "Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer (1477)," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 1 (2000): 41–62, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-30-1-41>.