

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

Translation by Shannon McSheffrey, with assistance from Ruth Mazo Karras, Roisin Cossar, Michelle Armstrong-Partida, Althea Thompson, and Tess Wingard (translation revised, August 2023). Original Latin transcription by Alan Stahl; corrected by Shannon McSheffrey with help from Roisin Cossar and Ruth Mazo Karras, from photographs of the manuscript kindly taken by Michelle Armstrong-Partida.

In 1355 the “Lords of the Night,” the Venetian criminal tribunal charged with investigating sexual offences and other crimes, 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. Below we present both an English translation of the document and a Latin transcription.

The translation is based on the transcription of the original record (Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Signori di Notte [Lords of the Night], criminal register 6, folio 64r) through photographs taken by Michelle Armstrong-Partida, aided significantly by these previous transcriptions and translations:

- *An unpublished Latin transcription of the record kindly provided by Alan Stahl, which formed the basis of our transcription;*
- *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 (<https://www.facebook.com/dallortogiovanni/posts/601815799830768>).*
- *Alex Baldassano – in their 2017 PhD thesis from the CUNY Graduate Centre, “Bodies of Resistance,” pp. 235-49 (available at https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2329/), 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; we have indicated below some of the alternate variant readings.

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 for Ronchaia. 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,¹ we have employed some textual 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]. In the cases where the gender is arguably ambiguous (as in *ipm* for *ipsum*, *him*), we have used the square brackets, though we believe that *ipsum*, *him*, is intended.

English Translation

Rolandino Ronchaia, who makes a living in the Rialto selling eggs and other things,² 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 woman³ 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.⁴ **He himself** went to the city of Padua to stay with a mason, [his] relative.⁵ 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] often heard 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

¹ 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 can make the gender ambiguous. The word "ipsum [him]," for instance, is abbreviated consistently in the manuscript as "ipm," which was a standard practice in Italian documents of this period. Arguably "ipm" could also mean "ipsam [her]," as the crucial vowel differentiating the two is omitted. This scribe, however, followed the common practice of clearly marking the female pronoun by inserting the vowel, referring to Ronchaia's wife as "ipām [ipsam]." Thus male pronouns are supplied here rather than they/them or she/her, as most of the time when the gender of the 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.

² Hergemöller has *omnia vel alia* (everything and anything), but there is no abbreviation mark over the first word, which appears clearly to say "oua/ova," eggs.

³ 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 (though the feminine article *unam* is used with it and she is otherwise called a *mulier*). If the use of the word *iuvenem* implies a certain masculinization of the wife, it is possibly another instance, Baldassano speculates, of gender-bending in Ronchaia's life story ("Bodies of Resistance," 236).

⁴ I.e. the Black Death, which hit Venice in 1348.

⁵ It is unclear whether this word – mazono in the manuscript – signifies the trade of mason or is the relative's name, Mazono.

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,⁶ and climbed on [his] body. The said Rolandino took the woman's part and, wishing to connect like 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.

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 [he] never showed 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. He deceived them 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 bring in some money.⁷

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.

⁶ In the original, "quas habet ad modum femine," which he had in the style of a woman: unclear if this meant that Ronchaia had breasts clothed in a bodice as a woman's were or had breasts like a woman's.

⁷ The manuscript here is unclear, resulting in some significantly varying translations. Our reading of the Latin is "interventu alicuius pecunie," for the bringing in of some money. That accords with Dall'Orto's modern Italian translation ("per guadagnare un poco di denaro"), and we believe it makes the most sense. The other transcriptions diverge: Stahl's Latin transcription has "interventu alicuius peccamine" [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*."

Latin Transcription

Archivio di Stato, Venice, Signori di Notte al Criminal, R.6, f.64.

NB: u and v are regularized. Abbreviations are silently expanded except for the pronouns or other words indicating the gender of persons, where the expansion is indicated by italics.

Mcccliiii, indictione septima, die xii mensis Marcii.

Rolandinus Ronchaia qui utebatur in Rivoalto vendendo ova et alia suspectus de peccato sodomitico ductus in camera tormenti coram Dominis de Nocte et interrogatus ut diceret veritatem de malis commissis per ipsum circa factum ipsius peccati. Statim, sine aliquo tormento, dixit et fuit confessus quod modo sunt anni x et ultra quod ipse accepit et disposavit unam iuvenem in uxorem cum qua stetit certo tempore. Vere numquam cognovit ipsam nec aliquem aliam mulierem in actu carnali quia numquam habuit aliquem appetitum carnalem et numquam potuit erigere membrum suum virile. Que sua uxor recessit ab ipso et obiit tempore mortalitatis [1348]. Ipse vero ivit ad standum Padue cum mazono hospite suo affine. Et quia habet faciem, vocem et actus femineos, dato quod non habeat orificium mulieris et habeat membrum et testiculos ad modum hominum, per multos extimabatur ipsum fore feminam per ea que apparebant exterius, et sepius audivit multi dicentes “ipsa est femina,” facientes de ipso Rolandino mentionem.

Postremo, quadam nocte dum foret in lecto in domo ipsius mazoni, unus homo qui⁸ hospitabatur in dicta domo putans ipsum fore feminam, cum animo cognoscendi ipsum ut feminam, carnaliter intravit lectum prope ipsum, apprehendens eum et incepit ipsum osculari et amplecti et stringere ei mamillas, quas habet ad modum femine, et ascendit super corpus ipsum⁹, dictus vero Rolandinus accipiens officium femine et volens conseri ut femina abscondit sibi suum membrum et aprehendit membrum ipsius hominis et posuit sibi in postiremo de retro ubi dictus homo spermatizavit et hoc facto dimisit ipsum. Et sic et eodem modo fuit cum duobus aliis in Padua, putantibus ipsum feminam.¹⁰

Posthec venit Veneciis et cum quia iam fuerat cum hominibus ut femina, accipiens officium femine, tum etiam propter actus muliebres extrinsecus apparentes, fama in tantum divulgata fuit quod omnes extimabant ipsum fore feminam, licet portaret pannos ad modum virorum, et multi nominabant ipsam Rolandinam. Et continuo utebatur cum meretricibus Rivoalti in lecto et eundo ad stuvas cum ipsis et utroque latere in tantum occultabat membrum suum quod aliqua numquam perpendit et manifestissime presentabat ipsum feminam. Et propter hoc fuit requisitus ad actum carnalem per multos et infinitos homines hic in Veneciis, et cum multis stetit in dicto actu domu ipsius et cum multis alibi ad requisitionem ipsorum qui putabant ipsum fore feminam. Quos decipiebat sub hoc modo, videlicet quod quando erant super corpus ipsius in quantum poterat occultabat membrum suum et capiebat membrum

⁸ MS: homo qui homo qui

⁹ ipsum: sic, for ipsius?

¹⁰ Here the gender of femin*m is ambiguous, but below three times in the next paragraph, in phrases indicating that everyone thought ipsum fore feminam, the word is explicitly gendered feminine.

choerentis¹¹ cum ipso et ponebat sibi impostiremo et stabat cum ipsis donec emittebant spermam, dando ipsis omnem delictionem ut faciunt meretrices viris. In quo quidem peccato perseveravit ab annis vii citra et ultra.

Interrogatus si numquam aliquis stans cum ipso in ipso actu perpendit se de ipso membro, respondit non. Interrogatus si stando cum eis erigebatur sibi membrum suum, respondit non. Interrogatus ob quam causam committebat istud peccatum, respondit interventu alicuius pecunie.¹²

Posthec fuit idem Rolandinus ponitus ad tormentum de mandatu ipsorum Dominorum et interrogatus ut diceret melius veritatem. Et dum non diceret aliud quam id quod superius dixit, fuit sibi data una sachata. Et propterea nichil aliud dixit quam ea que superius dicta et scripta sunt.

Posthec die xviii mensis Marcii coram inclito domino duce presentatus fuit idem Rolandinum et lectis eo presente omnibus suprascriptis. Perseverans in suam confessionem, firmavit dictum suum sicut superius dixit et scriptum est.

[*new ink*] Nota¹³ quod mccciiii indictione septima die xxviii Marcii per dominum Iohannem Nicolem Rosso, dominum Danielem Cornario¹⁴, vacante tertio iudice, fuit sentenciatus dictus Rolandinus ad comburendum ita quod peniter moratur.

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 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>)

¹¹ *for* coherentis

¹² *Others have transcribed this differently: Stahl has* interventu alicuius peccamine; *Hergemöller's version reads it as* ne inventum aliud pertinere, *indicating that this is an uncertain reading.*

¹³ *This paragraph is in different ink, apparently same hand.*

¹⁴ *fuit se deleted.*

Further Reading

Alex Baldassano, "Talking Back: Sodomy Laws and Transgressive Subjectivity in Medieval Venice," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 55, no. 2 (May 26, 2020): 40–59, <https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol55/iss2/3>.

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 and Katherine E. Pierpont, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, fourth edition (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2023).

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>.

Roland Betancourt, "Transgender Lives," in *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, eds., *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).
<https://www.aup.nl/en/book/9789048540266/trans-and-genderqueer-subjects-in-medieval-hagiography>.

Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska, eds. *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

Tess Wingard, "The Trans Middle Ages: Incorporating Transgender and Intersex Studies into the History of Medieval Sexuality," *English Historical Review*. forthcoming soon (as of August 2023).