

What Was Cross Dressing in the Middle Ages?

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1. What is and was cross-dressing?

First I should explain about my report. You may regard my report to be as ridiculous. But I am absolutely serious. Here I will talk about peculiar things but this is because I am trying to convey the medieval people's mentality, which is too difficult to explain in a normal way.

Cross-dressing nowadays is the object of psycho-medical research or only for pleasure or for deceiving people. Male cross-dressing is generally considered to be psychologically abnormal but female cross-dressing is not controversial. In our times, if a woman dresses in male clothes no one considers it strange. Here I will tell you a famous cross-dressing example.

I live at a small town in Japan named Takarazuka. Takarazuka is also the name of a commercial theater and this theater has theatrical troupes which are famous for their female cross-dressing. They are all girls and play male roles in male clothes in a kind of musical.

Besides I see normal women in male attire almost everyday and everywhere even in this small town. I have, however, never seen men in female attire in this town. On the other hand, in the medieval period it appears that female cross dressing was not as popular as male cross dressing. Or more strictly speaking female cross-dressing was considered a criminal act.

In the medieval period many jousts or tournaments, including helmets, armors, chest protections, etc were held and we have some reports about the tournaments where participants dressed in female garments. And this cross dressing seems to have carried no penalties at all. For example, Cypriot knights were described as fighting

in tournaments while dressed as women.¹

Interestingly, one such tournament--held in 1286 to celebrate the coronation of Henry of Lusignan as King of Jerusalem--was reported in detail. The following description is taken from Philippe de Navarres' eyewitness report:

The fest was the most beautiful one in one hundred years of feasts and tournaments, and they imitated the Round Table and the reign of Feminine, that is, knights dressed as ladies, and they jousted together. Then they played nuns that had with them monks and they jousted with each other; and they impersonated Lancelot and Tristan and Palamedes, and played many other splendid, delectable, and pleasant games.²

These cross dressers were not accused and were not criminal of course. They seemed to be taken it as a kind of merry joke. And we know a real, existing man who wore women clothes and travelled. We can read about his good showing in *Frauendienst* by Ulrich von Liechtenstein.³ In his book, Ulrich travelled and took part in many jousts in female dress. He was not accused but praised as a respectable, admirable, and brave knight because he broke many lances in jousts.

But some male cross-dressers were accused. I will tell you here two examples of male cross-dressing which were accused by everybody. One of these is found in the famous *History of the Franks* by Gregory of Tours.

In this story a man who wore nun's clothes was found in a convent. And an abbess was charged of that. But a doctor explained, "This man who when he was a child was diseased in the thigh and was so ill that his life was despaired of. . . . then I castrated him." All the people who had accused the abbess were persuaded with these words.⁴ I think a man without testicles is still a male, but medieval people didn't seem to think so. In their view a male without testicles stood nearer to a woman than a man.

We can find another example in a roman entitled *Silence*. This is a 13th century roman in which a girl in male

dress named Silence played an active part. At the end of this story a man in female attire was found in the queen's palace and executed because this man who disguised as a nun was Eufeme(=Queen)'s lover.⁵

Both a man in Gregory of Tours and this man in *Silence* were found in the place where men were not allowed to enter. And here arises one question. If a female in male attire was found in a place in which women were not allowed to enter, what would happen to her? Next I will answer this question.

2. Women's cross dressing in the medieval period

First of all I'd like to think about the cross-dressings in the famous hagiographical literature *Legenda Aurea*⁶, which was one of the bestsellers in the Middle Ages. Even in the early modern period it continued as a bestseller. From 1470 to 1500, during 30 years, 156 versions of this famous book were printed all over Europe. Or some say 173 versions were printed at least. Given that only 128 versions of the Bible were printed during the same period, you will be surprised at the popularity of *Legenda Aurea*.⁷ This situation would be the same as in the Medieval Ages.

About 50 female saints were mentioned in this *Legenda Aurea*; Six of these saints were cross-dressers. And interestingly we cannot find any male saints in *Legenda Aurea* who dressed female clothes. Many female saints were referred only by name but very detail descriptions were given to these 6 cross-dressing women saints. Jacobus de Voragine, the author of *Legenda Aurea*, must have known the importance of these cross-dressing saints as one category of women saints.

First I will observe Pelagia whom American Sociologist and Historian Bullough pointed out as the archetype of cross-dressing female saints.⁸ Pelagia, who was the richest and highest noble dame in Antioch, listening to the preach of Nonnos (Veronus in English translation), decided to repent her sins. Having being baptized by

Nonnos, Pelagia gave all her fortune to the poor and came to the Mt. Olive as anchoress, dressing in male attire, and served God. Before long, Pelagia came to be called Pelagius and became famous. After she had died, the bishop there came to hold the funeral ceremony and found that Pelagius was a female. ⁹Jacobus wrote that Pelagia was the noblest dame in Antioch but in the Syrian version of Pelagia she was a rich prostitute. According to the Syrian version, Pelagia asked Nonnos to give her his garment after being baptized and he gave it to her.¹⁰ Sandra Lowerre says that by putting the Nonnos' garment on, Pelagia could break from her past, and Lowerre writes "not only has she purified herself for eight days in the robes of the newly baptized, she has also taken up an identity for herself that is as far away as possible from what she had represented in the past. Her former life was characterized by sexuality, rich clothes and general luxury; by donning the bishop's clothes after her purification, she puts on the 'new man' of Ephesians 4:22-24".¹¹ In her opinion, Pelagia, putting Nonnos' garment on, rejected what she was and she became a new person.

Salisbury says, "Pelagia rejected the role that was expected of her: to become a Christian woman. Instead, she chose to become as much like her mentor as possible. she took his clothes, and with his clothes assumed the identity of a man. Not only had she renounced her previous life and changed her name, she renounced her gender altogether".¹²In her opinion, Pelagia, donning bishop's clothes, became a Christian woman. And she writes, "Pelagia renounced her gender altogether" but what is meant here by these words is not clear. What was her gender? If she renounced her gender, did it mean that she got virility, became macho, or became male?

Hotchkiss mentions, "Pelagia's goal, like that of the voluntary eunuchs, is asexuality".¹³ It is inconsistent however if she "attempts to eradicate gender entirely" by wearing the male garment. It would be natural that her goal was not asexuality but to become male if she wore male garment.

Next I will show the story of Marina.¹⁴ Jacobus de Voragine wrote about her as following. Her father

decided to enter a cloister. As he didn't want his daughter to stay in this mundane world, he made her assume the male attire and enter the cloister with his "son", Marinos. After her father had died, she continued to live in this cloister. But one day a woman who had borne a knight's child said her child's father was Marinos. After that accusation she was expelled from the cloister. In the Greek version of this story the situation when they enter the cloister was different from that of Jacobus. In the Greek version, her father tried to leave her in this mundane world but she beseeched her father to bring her to the cloister together. She said to her father who had said it was impossible for her to enter the cloister: "First I cut my hair and don the male dress, and then enter the cloister with you."¹⁵ This expression "cut the hair" responds to Paul's saying, "Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering." To sum up, "cut the hair" meant she rejected her womanhood.

According to Hotschkiss, there were 34 cross-dressing women saints until the end of medieval period.¹⁶ And cross-dressing Hildegund of Schoenau was referred to in *Miracles* by Caesarius of Heisterbach as actually existing.¹⁷ But it is not important if there were really many cross-dressing women saints in the Medieval Ages. It is much more important if ordinary people believed that women had entered cloisters, donned the male dress, and that the cross-dressing woman could become saints.

Many cross-dressing women saints appeared during the late antiquity. One of the reasons why cross-dressing women saints appeared in the late antiquity had something to do with the fact that the women deacons had disappeared. According to some historians, in the beginning period of the Christian Church, even women could serve God as deacons but gradually women were excluded from serving God as deacons.¹⁸ Therefore if a woman wished to become a deacon or priest about the end of Ancient period, she could not help disguising herself. The story of women cross-dressing showed the exclusion of the women from the hierarchy of

the Christian church. Another change was the declining the women's status in economic life. According to Karen Jo Torjesen the economic power of women in household management had been getting lower and lower through the third Century.¹⁹ Women tried to make up for this loss of power. By what means? By freeing themselves from their families. But how could the women live after abandoning their families ? Of course by disguising themselves as men. This was, however, the situation only in the late antiquity. The medieval period was different from the late antiquity. Then, in medieval ages, why did women don men's clothes?

Bullough writes, cross-dressing was justified to emphasize a higher virtue in society. A female who secretly wore men's clothes was not considered abnormal. That a female might desire to be a male, in fact, seemed to be a healthy desire, a normal longing not unlike the desire of a peasant to become a noble. If a woman desired to be a man, that is, to try to make herself better, she was rather encouraged. And the cross-dressing was the way to make herself better.²⁰

Hotchkiss says these cross-dressing women could overcome their sexual vulnerability only through male impersonation. She regards women cross-dressing as the means of living in the male dominated society.²¹

Marie Delcourt argues that the symbolic sense of cross-dressing is breaking with the feminine past, hostility towards the family and authority, and renunciation of sexual life. In short, according to her, cross-dressing is the women's asserting in the androcentric society.²²

But the explanations of Bullough, Hotchkiss and Delcourt don't persuade me, given women in modern times don't disguise themselves as males. Are women in modern times freed from all the constraints of society? And recently male-cross dressing has been increasing. Do men have to assert themselves in a women-centric society? Some men say, yes, but probably that is not true. In the next chapter I will discuss the meaning of women's disguising during the medieval period.

3. The meaning of women's cross-dressing during the medieval period

A. Church's view

It was a canon in Decretum of Gratian that gave the biggest influence to the prohibition of woman cross-dressing in the Middle Ages. This canon says, "Si qua mulier suo proposito utile iudicans, ut virili veste utatur, propter hoc viri habitum imitetur, anathema sit."²³ This canon had been the canon of Gangra, said Gratian, but it was possible that they were different in details. I could not get the original text of canon of Gangra and read it only through the English translation. Therefore I cannot judge how they were different. The translation of Gangra writes, "If any woman, under pretence of asceticism, shall change her apparel and, instead of a woman's accustomed clothing, shall put on that of a man, let her be anathema."²⁴ Even if there were small differences between canon of Decretum and that of Gangra, they have probably the same meaning.

According to Hefle who compiled the canons of the church councils, this canon of Gangra was decreed in order to prohibit the Eustatians who had insisted the difference of sex would disappear, if women donned the men's clothes or, especially sacred garments of monks.²⁵ But we cannot suppose that Gratian knew Eustatian, who had tried to construct the Almenian cloister system in 4th century. There is another provision against the cross-dressing. It is the penitential of Burchard of Worms, who wrote, "Si qua mulier propter continentiam quae putatur, habitum mutat, et pro solito muliebri amictu viri sumit, anathema sit."²⁶ This canon's content is same as Gratian's Decretum.

Would you remind yourselves of the words of the Bible about cross-dressing? These read "A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God."²⁷ Indeed the Bible prohibited both male and female cross-dressing. But Gratian and Burchard prohibited only female cross-dressing, hence neglecting the words of the Bible. Why?

With regards to the medieval prohibition against the male cross-dressing I could find only one provision in many canons and penitentials. It was found in the penitential rules of Silos in Spain. This reads “Those who in the dance wear women’s clothes and strangely devise them and employ jaw bones and a bow and a spade and things like these shall do penance for one year.”²⁸ Male cross-dressing was indeed prohibited here but this provision is different from those of Gratian and Burchard.

Gratian and Burchard prohibited the female cross-dressing itself but the provision of Silos didn’t prohibit male cross-dressing itself, but it did prohibit the sorcery action through male cross-dressing. What was prohibited was sorcery, not cross-dressing. In this case, cross-dressing is the only means for sorcery. In addition this deviation from the rule was not regarded as serious one. Because this male cross-dressing was penitent for one year and this is the same as refusing to apologize for bad-mouthing parents. If a bishop went hunting with dogs or hawks, he should be subjected to eight year penitence. A bishop’s hunting was eight times more serious than male cross-dressing. In comparison with this, canons of Gratian and Burchard were much stricter. Women were to be excommunicated in Gratian’s and Burchard’s canons—it was the most strict punishment. And the canons of Gratian and Burchard showed us that women disguised themselves as men, not for casual sorcery action, but for cross-dressing itself or for another purpose.

Usually we wonder why people put on an another sex’s clothes in spite of these prohibitions. And we investigate male cross-dressing and female cross-dressing from the same viewpoint. But taking into account the fact that these rules prohibited only the women from wearing men’s clothes, we should regard these provisions as reiterated because there were many women who donned the male garments. Then why did the women try to wear the men’s clothes? For answering this question we will discuss the background of the cross-dressing.

B. Background of the cross-dressing

Ambrose said, “the human who has no belief is female, who should be in the name of her sex. But human who believes is nearer to the man of perfection.”²⁹ By these words Ambrose insisted that women having belief is near to men. And in his *About Virgins*, after saying Christ had changed water into wine, he wrote “Christ has already begun to change sex.”³⁰ Judging from the context this means that a woman can be changed to a man by Christ. Augustine said in his *Confession* that his mother was a woman in her clothes but was a man in belief.³¹ This means his mother was a woman in her dresses but actually was a man.

In the Gospel of Thomas we find the following words.

Simon Peter said to them, “Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life.”

Jesus said, “Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.”³²

Ambrose, Augustine, and Thomas had the same understanding that “Even a woman can be saved, if she becomes a man.” What does this mean? Could a woman become a man ? Of course yes. Medieval people didn't doubt whether it was right or not. If a woman had not been able to become a man they would not have used such an expression. Then how could a woman become a man ?

In the life of Perpetua she saw a vision before her martyrdom. In that vision she became a man, that is “et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus.”³³ In a vision everything was possible. Even a woman could have won a man freely. In spite of that possibility, why did she become a man on the occasion of fighting in that vision ? Now we should contemplate about this. Philo of Alexandria said it was the most important that a woman abandoned her woman sex by changing herself to a man. That is why woman sex is material, passive, corporeal and caught by physical senses but man sex is active, rational, non-corporeal and nearer to heart and thought. And

he also said if a woman became a man, she would abandon the mundane Kingdom where a woman was entangled by physical senses. Such a thought was laid under the church fathers' thinking.³⁴

Carol J. Clover insists in her *Regardless Sex : Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe* that the fault line runs not between males and females per se, but between able-bodied men (and the exceptional women) on one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men). In other words, a physical woman could become a social man, and a physical man could become a social woman in this world.³⁵ And this world is similar to the early Middle Ages' Christian society.

According to the understanding of the anatomy since Antiquity there were no differences of body between man and woman. Medieval medical specialists understood women were men turned inside in their genitals. On the ground of this idea Thomas Laqueur made one sex model theory, according to which there were only one sex since Antiquity. According to his one sex model, woman and man were same in sex but different in gender. Therefore female could be changed to male easily. And they had believed in their idea until 18th Century.³⁶

Joan Cadden asked how the basis of sex difference was considered by medieval people. And she found that medieval people thought heat was the most fundamental physical difference between sexes, and a cause of many other differences. Men were able to refine their superfluous blood completely into semen because of their superior heat. And women produced inferior semen, that is menses, because of their inferior heat. When women became hotter, they approached men.³⁷ Therefore some of the women saints tried to raise their bodily heat with hot things pressed on their bodies or by throwing themselves into a hot water basin heated by coals.³⁸

It was because the body temperature of a man was standard. Women deviated from this standard, and if women attained this standard, they could be men. This body temperature was not detected from the outside.

Therefore if women wore men's clothes and entered a cloister, and then if they were not found to be women, it meant they could become men, stated some hagiographers.

C. Why did woman cross-dress in medieval ages?

In the medieval people's view, human beings moved from a masculine male to a feminine female. They thought sex could be changed from female to male but gradually. So a biological woman could be a sociological man.

For them, biological sex was not so important as sociological sex because biological or physical sex was changeable. It was sociological sex, that is gender, that decided the place of human beings in a society. This biological sex was decided by their body temperature and humidity³⁹. This meant, a female who made an effort to be a man, could be a man. And they knew various means to become men. The means to become a man were various. Submerging themselves into hot water, pressing a hot cross to the body, etc. With such means a woman could be a man.

Well, if a physical woman could be regarded as a man socially, and if a woman knew how she could be a man, and if the society where a woman lived gave herself social disadvantages, she would wish to be regarded as a man, and try to be a man. And in such a society, if a woman, dressing in man's clothes, was regarded a man, it meant that she had become a man. That is the meaning of the cross-dressing.

Of course, arguments of Bullough and Hotchkiss are not wrong. But their arguments are too sociological and too modern. These should be applied to the people who think with modern rationalism. Since medieval people didn't have such rationalism we should not misconstrue their cross-dressing with such rationalism.

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- ¹ James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 473.
- ² Ad Putter, “Transvestite Knights in Medieval Life and Literature,” in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, Garland Publishing, 2000, p. 283.
- ³ *Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s Service of Ladies*, translated by J. W. Thomas, The Boydell Press, 2004.
- ⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Franku-Shi*, translated by Masatoshi Sugimoto, Shin-Hyoron, 2007, pp. 531 and 532.
- ⁵ Sarah Roche-Mahde, *Silence. A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, Michigan State University Press, 1992,
- ⁶ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend. Readings on the Saints*, vol. I, II, translated by William Granger Ryan, Princeton University Press, 1993.
- ⁷ Sherry L. Leames, *The Legenda aurea. A Reexamination of Its Paradoxical History*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985,
- ⁸ Vern L. Bullough, “Transvestites in the Middle Ages,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 79, 1973, p. 1384.
- ⁹ *The Golden Legend*, vol. II, pp. 230–232.
- ¹⁰ *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, introduced and translated by Sebastian P. Brook and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, University of California Press, 1988, p. 42 and 58.
- ¹¹ Sandra Lowerre, “To Rise Beyond Their Sex : Female Cross-Dressing Saints in Caxton’s *Vitas Patrum*,” in *Riddles, Knights and Cross-dressing Saints*, edited by Thomas Honegger, Peter Lang 2004, p. 81. (Ephesians 4:22–24 : To put off, according to former conversation, the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error. And be renewed in spirit of your mind: And put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth.)
- ¹² Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, Verso, 1991, p. 102f.
- ¹³ Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man. Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe*, Garland Publishing, 1996, p. 27.
- ¹⁴ *The Golden Legend*, vol. I, pp. 324–325.
- ¹⁵ *Holy Women of Byzantium. Ten Saints’ Lives in English Translation*, edited by Alice-Mary Talbot, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996, p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Hotchkiss, pp. 131–141.
- ¹⁷ *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordine Cisterciensis Dialogus Miraculorum*, vol. I, accurate recognovit Josephus Strange, Coloniae, Bonnae et Bruxellis, MDCCCLI, pp. 47–53.
- ¹⁸ See Ida Raming, *The Exclusion of Women from the Priesthood: Divine Law or Sex Discrimination?*, Scarecrow press, 1976.
- ¹⁹ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, Harper San Francisco, 1993, pp. 53–87.
- ²⁰ Vern L. Bullough, “Cross Dressing and Social Status in the Middle Ages,” in *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, edited by Vern L. Bullough/Bonnie Bullough, University of Pennsylvania, 1993, p. 46.
- ²¹ Hotchkiss, p. 18.
- ²² Marie Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite. Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity*. Studio Books, 1961, p. 96.
- ²³ *Decreti Prima Pars* Dist. XXX, C. VI. p. 109.

- ²⁴ Delcourt, p. 96.
- ²⁵ *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, Parker, 1900, p. 97f.
- ²⁶ *PL*. 140, Col. 805.
- ²⁷ Deutronomy, 22—5
- ²⁸ John T. McNeill, Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, Columbia University Press, 1938, p. 289.
- ²⁹ *CCSL* 14:392.
- ³⁰ *PL*. vol. 16. 215B.
- ³¹ Augustinus, *Kokuhaku*, translated by Yoshio Watanabe, Chikuma Shobo, 1966, p. 135.
- ³² Sasagu Arai, *Thomas ni yoru Hukuin-sho*, Koudansya, 1994, p. 287.
- ³³ *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, vol. II, translated by Herbert Musurillo, Clarendon Press, p. 118, 119.
- ³⁴ Richard A. Baer, *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female*, E. J. Brill, 1970, p. 46.
- ³⁵ Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex : Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* vol. 68, 1993, pp. 380 and 387.
- ³⁶ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press, 1990.
- ³⁷ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages. Medicine, Science and Culture*. Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 171.
- ³⁸ Jacqueline Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" in *Gender & Christianity in Medieval Europe. New Perspectives*, edited by Lisa M. Bitel & Felice Lifshits, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, p. 45.
- ³⁹ I could not refer to this humidity in this report because of limited space.

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