

Trans & Gender Identity in the Premodern Mediterranean

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A regular in Valencia's marketplace, in 1490 Margalida always wore women's clothing. As she went in and out of other people's houses, she was also dressed as a woman. This was entirely unremarkable behavior, except Margalida was assigned male at birth and her parents had given her the name Miquel Borràs. She was the child of a Mallorcan notary.² The laconic record of Margalida's life suggests that for at least a time, Margalida lived and was welcomed as a woman within a small community in Valencia, which was not her hometown. If Margalida had abandoned Mallorca and set sail for Valencia in the hopes of living as a woman, her aspirations were cruelly crushed by a penal system which made little allowance for gender creativity. She was imprisoned, tortured and finally hanged, dressed in a man's short shirt that left her genitals exposed, with shorn hair.³ Her violent death, replete with its theatrical shaming of Margalida's body and with its foreshadowing of the quotidian violence inflicted on the bodies of transpeople today, was meant to set an example to others of the danger of

¹ It is our feminist practice to alternate the position of "first author" in all of our collaborative work.

² Melchior Miralles, *Crònica i dietari del capellà d'Alfons el Magnànim* (Valencia: Fonts històriques valencianes, 2011), 275.

³ Miralles, *Crònica i dietari*, 275.

queering one's gender.⁴ The violent suppression of certain gender expressions, however, did not make them disappear.

Margalida's life exemplifies a number of the themes we hope to tease out in this essay. Literary scholar C. Riley Snorton has articulated a "historiographical practice that identifies how events, actors, and places illustrate the conditions of possibility for gender transformation."⁵ We take up his practice here to explore the place of the medieval Mediterranean, and its actors, through the lens of sexuality and gender identity.

Margalida was a woman of the Mediterranean, mobile and creative, who worked to fashion the life she wanted to live. As the daughter of a notary, she was born into a class with some economic means.⁶ When she left Mallorca as a migrant and made a life in Valencia, Margalida also left behind whatever economic support or class status her family might have provided. Perhaps that support would not have been available to her in Mallorca, were she to live her life as a woman. Perhaps leaving home was necessary

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<https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/TDOR%20Remembrance%20Report-2022.pdf#overlay-context=user>

⁵ M.W. Bychowski, Howard Chiang, Jack Halberstam et al, "'Trans*historicitie's': A Roundtable Discussion." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 2018), 660.

⁶ For the social status of notaries and the notarial culture of the Mediterranean, see Michael J. Alexander, "Lawyers and Notaries in Medieval Padua," *Medieval Prosopography*, 29 (2014), 103-130 and Daniel Lord Smail, *Imaginary Cartographies: Possession and Identity in Late Medieval Marseille* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 20-30; Robert I. Burns, *Jews in Notarial Culture: Latinate Wills in Mediterranean Spain, 1250-1350* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 38-43. See also the chapter on "The Notariate" in Burns, *Diplomatarium of the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia: The Registered Charters of its Conqueror, Jaume I, 1257-1276. I: Society and Documentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

for her to live as she needed to. All of these possibilities are the subject of our inquiry here--the intersection of sex, gender, and the Mediterranean.

The question of identity is a vexed one, in the medieval past as much as in the present. We want to acknowledge art historian Roland Betancourt's exhortation "to take risks in fleshing out the intersectional lives of the downtrodden, while also providing spectrums of possibility for the identities and freedoms allowed to the more privileged ranks and neglected by the historical record."⁷ To be sure, recovering the histories of the gender fluid and their lived experience in premodern history is a challenge, one that as historians we hope to navigate by relying on a variety of documentary and literary sources that point to trans lives, but we also consider evidence that is highly suggestive and at times inconclusive. The challenge of working with a paucity of documents or sources that silence particular voices is one that is frequently faced by historians who work on the marginalized and disenfranchised, especially in the case of religious and racialized communities. Historians of enslavement, particularly those who focus on sexuality and gender, such as Marisa Fuentes, have underscored the complicity of the archive that "conceals, distorts, and silences as much as it reveals."⁸ In *Slavery Unseen*,

⁷ Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender & Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 16.

⁸ Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), at 48; Fuentes, "Reading the Specter of Racialized Gender in Eighteenth-Century Bridgton, Barbados," in *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, ed. by Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2018), 49-51. See also Berry and Harris, "Introduction" in *Sexuality and Slavery*, 3-5; Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 134-5; Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds. *Contesting the Archives: Finding Women In the Sources* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

Lamonte Aidoo makes the point that omissions, cloaked language, and the camouflaging of sexual taboos can still be studied and considered evidence—for the very reason that those in power sought to make these acts invisible.⁹ Actual bodies disappear in archives that function as repositories of the privileged and powerful. Gary Ferguson has noted that the court records and ambassadorial correspondence that dealt with the trial of Spanish and Portuguese migrant men who participated in same gender marriages in early modern Rome were “deliberately destroyed in order to suppress its contents.”¹⁰ What sources do exist often obscure the lives of the subjugated by primarily preserving moments of criminality and violence—as we see in the case of Margalida, whose death and public spectacle represent an alterity and transgression that secular authorities overcome through their highly symbolic punishment. Margalida’s genitals are purposefully displayed and her naked body is dressed in men’s clothing to show the triumph of officials in imposing a gender identity that they believed should match Margalida’s sex. Despite the often cruel and performative work of officials tasked with policing gender, however, sex assigned at birth did not determine everyone’s gender identity in the medieval Mediterranean.

Although the sources for those who transed gender or lived trans lives may be few and fragmentary, and do more to privilege the dominant in order to erase the trans and non-binary, we believe it is useful to engage with methodologies that use subtexts and silences to open up a space for discussing emotions, agency, the gender and

⁹ Lamonte Aidoo, *Slavery Unseen: Sex, Power, and Violence in Brazilian History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4-7.

¹⁰ Gary Ferguson, *Same-Sex Marriage in Renaissance Rome: Sexuality, Identity, and Community in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), at 85, 63.

sexual possibilities in erotic entanglements, and for employing a “disciplined imagination” that allows us more room to speculate, to reconstruct, and draw connections based on our knowledge of gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages.¹¹ Karma Lochrie reminds us that secrecy “articulates boundaries of cultural anxiety, prohibition, fantasy, and devotion,” so that we remember that our sources may be purposefully reticent about gender inversions and gender fluidity, as well as same-gender sexual relations, precisely because different parties were invested in protecting, controlling, or prohibiting such behavior out of fear of its seductiveness.¹² At the same time, the historian Jen Manion encourages us to “embrace” the ephemeral nature of sex and the difficulties of pinpointing transgender and transsexual subjects in historical sources because making clear cut distinctions is contrary to the complexity of genders and sexualities in the human experience where much “blurriness” lies. Manion warns that “the fact that historians continue to argue that the absence of such evidence constitutes its nonexistence reveals the limits of historical method and the lie of objectivity.”¹³ Because many of our sources cast our subjects through the lens of criminality, we seek to bring more attention to how trans people created communities, formed relationships, and carved out spaces for their existence. While we cannot be

¹¹ Valerie Garver used this methodology of a “disciplined imagination” in *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World* (Cornell University Press, 2009). So, too, did Nicola Denzey in *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Beacon Press, 2007).

¹² Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 179, 185-6.

¹³ Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 10.

certain how people understood their own subjectivity in the medieval past, we take seriously our obligation to read against the grain of often hostile sources to crack open the many identities our subjects lived.

Moreover, we do not read the paucity of documents on trans lives as evidence of rare, exceptional cases; rather, we recognize that some people were more successful than others in circumventing attention and some could have easily remained hidden under the capacious charge of sodomy. What constituted “sodomy” in canon law and in medieval society was so broadly defined that it encompassed not only all sexual activities that did not involve a penis in a vagina with a man on top of a woman but also included any behaviors deemed sexually sinful.¹⁴ Robert Mills and Igor De Souza have made the case that medieval authorities used the term sodomy to cover a wide range of cross gendered behaviors that included dress and bodily transformations.¹⁵

Others transing gender lived in contexts that allowed for more gender fluidity. For example, in the Abbasid and Umayyad caliphal courts, it was not uncommon to find

¹⁴ For the wide ranging sexual activities and behaviors that fall under the term “sodomy,” see Ruth Mazo Karras, “The Regulation of ‘Sodomy’ in the Latin East and West,” *Speculum* 95, no. 4 (2020), 970-1; Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 180-3; Helmet Puff, “Same-Sex Possibilities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford, 2013), 379-385; Emily J. Hutchinson and Sara McDougall, “Pardonable Sodomy: Uncovering Laurence’s Sin and Recovering the Range of the Possible,” *Medieval People* 37, no. 1 (2022), 125. A number of scholars mention transmen in early Christian religious environments or transwomen in imperial courts and harems. See, for example, Betancourt’s chapter on “Transgender Lives” in *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 89-120.

¹⁵ Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 84-5; Igor H. De Souza, “Elenx de Céspedes: Indeterminate Genders in the Spanish Inquisition,” in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 48, 59.

male dancers who adopted a feminine persona, wore women's clothing and perfume, and engaged in sex with men.¹⁶ While scholars have focused on these musicians as examples of transvestism and same-gender sex, we cannot ignore the possibility that some of these individuals may have been transwomen who may have had sex with other cis men or women, or other folks who were transing gender, or some combination of all of these. In the eastern Mediterranean, Betancourt makes the case that Byzantine conciliar decrees recognized that ascetic women in the early Christian period lived as men, and notes the gender affirming surgery that the emperor Elagabalus sought to match her female name, women's clothing, and feminine habits.¹⁷ Byzantine physicians were clearly familiar with surgical and non-surgical procedures for the castration of eunuchs. Leah DeVun notes that Latin and Arabic surgical manuals recognized the existence of sex-variant bodies (i.e. intersex or "hermaphrodites"), including women with enlarged sex organs that appeared to have a penis. Throughout the medieval Mediterranean, medical knowledge existed to remove male and female genitalia as well as breasts. While much of this medical literature was aimed at "correcting" sex organs to render a body distinctly male or female, it is not out of the realm of possibility that some individuals, like Elagabalus, sought surgery to make their bodies more in line with their gender identity.¹⁸

¹⁶ Everett K. Rowson, "Entertainment: Institutionalized Transvestism at the Caliphal Court in Medieval Baghdad," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 45-7.

¹⁷ Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 106-8.

¹⁸ Given that Byzantine surgeons did perform mastectomies, gynecomastia, and scrotal rhacosis, Betancourt makes the point that, "We cannot rule out the possibility that an elective surgery could have been undertaken to alter the physiognomy of the body so as

In thinking through how to write about people whose sex assigned at birth did not align with their gender presentation in the medieval Mediterranean, we are indebted to the scholarship of Jen Manion, whose formulation of “transing... gender” allows us to be attentive to “a process or practice without claiming to understand what it meant to that person or asserting any kind of fixed identity on them.”¹⁹ As historians distanced by centuries from our subjects, we take Manion’s formulation to heart and do not presume to settle an identity on anyone that they would not have accepted for themselves. While the sources that capture details of these trans lives are almost all hostile towards their subjects, criminal interrogations in the Christian Mediterranean paired with sources from the Islamicate world remind us that the premodern world included gender non-conforming and gender queer folks. In documenting that inclusion, we are ever mindful of Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt’s admonition that historical trans lives are not an “abstract concept,” but the forebears of transfolks living, thriving, and suffering today.²⁰ As historians whose sources hint at the creativity and also the tremendous danger that

to adhere to one’s gender identity, despite not appearing in the textbook prescriptions that have come down to us.” Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, at 113, 109-114; Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 134-162. See also Peter E. Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith, *Medieval Islamic Medicine* (Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press), 63-4, 105-7, 136.

¹⁹ Manion, *Female Husbands*, 11.

²⁰ Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, “Introduction,” in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 15.

accompanied transing gender in the premodern, we are acutely aware of the resonances with contemporary trans lives.²¹

Acknowledging our obligation to both the past and the present, we intend for this study to push beyond simple reclamation with an argument that centers the agency and choices of people who transed gender in the medieval Mediterranean to suggest that transness and Mediterraneanness were mutually reinforcing categories. In treating the different if overlapping themes of sexuality and gender identity together in this article, we broaden the conversation about what we can consider common to Mediterranean culture. Here, we build on our argument for a shared sexual culture in the Mediterranean where the fluidity and mobility of the region opened up discrete spaces for a spectrum of sexual activities and gender expressions. Many of these sexual and gender non-confirming behaviors may have unsettled societal expectations and transgressed laws and religious doctrine.²² Our “queering” of the premodern Mediterranean, however, suggests that, rather than place these individuals on the margins of society and at odds with the normative, their existence, desires, and activities were integrated—to varying degrees—into Mediterranean societies.²³ In this

²¹ Sarah S. Jackson, Jalen Brown, and Ruth M. Pfeiffer, et al., “Analysis of Mortality Among Transgender and Gender Diverse Adults in England,” *JAMA Network Open* 2023; 6(1):e2253687. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.53687.

²² Brian Catlos has argued that “there is no reason to assume that confessional divisions trumped all other factors” or “was the only one vector of identity among many that individuals and groups might deploy at any given time.” He underscores that common lifestyles, among other factors, could bind groups together and encourage acculturation and communication as well as provoke anxiety and defensiveness. See Catlos, “Accursed, Superior Men: Ethno-Religious Minorities and Politics in the Medieval Mediterranean,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 4 (2014), 846-7.

²³ Susan A. McDonough and Michelle Armstrong-Partida, “Sexual Practices and Fluidities in the Medieval Mediterranean,” forthcoming in *Medieval Encounters*.

vein, we also employ Guido Ruggiero's theory of "consensus realities" that explains how identities can be created and reinforced among like-minded individuals who share similar beliefs and activities—even when such behaviors could be rejected and condemned in broader mainstream culture. Thus, specific communities and social spaces allowed trans and non-binary folks to reveal their true selves and sexual desires to those who shared an agreed-upon reality.²⁴ The work of the anthropologist Jane Ward is also instructive here for thinking about how intimate partners and friends perform gender labor—that is, they provide validation for the gender identity of the other person, the secret-keeping, and the labor of "forgetting" their partner's past maleness or femaleness in order to bolster the trans identity of the individual.²⁵ We can see, therefore, how trans and gender queer people could create communities based on these "consensus realities" and alliances. But the necessary work of the community in enforcing a transperson's identity was also a potentially destabilizing factor, especially in a premodern judicial environment that criminalized and undermined trans lives. As we encounter people transing gender in the premodern Mediterranean, we will tease out, as best we are able, the ways in which their communities, large and small, supported and endangered them.

Queerness in the Mediterranean

²⁴ Guido Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 21.

²⁵ Jane Ward, "Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression," *Sexualities* 13, no. 2 (2010): 236-54.

Attentive to that queer presence and alerted to that possibility through recent trans scholarship, we can look anew at examples from the historical record that have been read as moments cross-dressing or same gender sexuality to suggest other interpretations. The Christian theologian and writer Francesc Eiximenis, whose treatises in Catalan addressed what he understood as the hot moral concerns of the fourteenth century, shared an anecdote in his *Terç del crestià*, published in 1409. He recounted witnessing the execution by hanging of a “woman ... who had for some years held a judicial office while clothed in masculine attire, and had taken two wives... before the church.”²⁶ One of these wives, herself a widow, had denounced her husband as a woman, causing her husband’s arrest as a “sodomite.”²⁷ Eiximenis credits the

²⁶ Josiah Blackmore, “The Poets of Sodom,” in *Queer Iberia*, edited by Josiah Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutchison (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1999), 217-18 fn30. Both Sherry Velasco and Blackmore analyze this as an example of lesbian sexuality, which is of course possible, but the combination of male clothing and the occupation as a government official, available only to men in the fifteenth century, raises the possibility that this person was trans. See also Sherry Velasco, *Lesbians in Early Modern Spain* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 35. Mary Elizabeth Perry notes two reports of “female homosexual activity” in Seville that allege the use of prosthetic genitalia. One woman was exiled and whipped, the other was hanged in 1624 for “robberies, murders, and audacity.” See Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder*, 125.

²⁷ Jamey Jespersen has recently shown how transfeminine indigenous and African people were collapsed into and prosecuted under the crime of sodomy in New Spain, proving again how capacious and dangerous the charge of “crimes against nature” was to people who transed gender. She explores sodomy trials in New Spain “to illuminate the transgressive feminine desires, expressions and roles of individuals who, under the constraints of binary Spanish colonial gender, were misunderstood by conquistadors, and then ‘misinscribed’ by historians, as simply men.” While she focuses specifically on trans feminine people, her point about the way sodomy charges could and did collapse categories that are distinct in the contemporary world, like trans and queer and homosexual offers us a way to see trans folks in medieval sodomy cases. See “Trans Misogyny in the Colonial Archive: Re-Membering Trans-Feminine Life and Death in New Spain, 1604-1821,” *Gender & History*, 1–21, quote on 4, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12733>

“clemency of the authorities” and the accused’s loyal service to the government for the fact that hanging, rather than burning at the stake, was the punishment. To make sure bystanders understood why this behavior was to be condemned, the accused was “hanged with that artifice around her neck with which she had carnally lain with the two women.”²⁸

Eiximenis’s text is unequivocal about the author’s view--this was a woman intent on deception and sexual depravity with her use of a dildo. The condemned had masqueraded as a governmental official, and so had wrongfully accessed and abused social privileges that were limited to men. The fear here is palpable; if the people could not trust that the judiciary was composed of those who were who they said they were, that marriages were correctly headed by men, the hierarchical foundations of society might just crumble. For all of these reasons, Eiximenis was certain the death sentence was right and just. Similarly, in 1455, an unnamed woman in Mallorca was condemned to be whipped throughout the city because she “fashioned her hair and dressed in the manner of a man in order to provoke men to sin.”²⁹ This laconic entry in records of condemnation, coupled with Eiximenis’s anecdote, raises many more questions than we can answer definitively. The Christian judiciary assumed these individuals were women intending to deceive men through their attire, and, presumably through their deception, entice them into some manner of sexual sin.³⁰ Even more dangerous, this deception

²⁸ Blackmore, “Poets of Sodom,” 219, fn 30.

²⁹ Rossello Vaquer, *L’homosexualitat*, 19: “una dona la qual anava en la forma del cabells com en lo hàbit del cap en forma de home per provocar los homes a pecat.”

³⁰ For more on the “pernicious trope” of cross-dressing as deceptive, see Spencer-Hall and Gutt, “Introduction,” in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects*, 27.

allowed women to access avenues to power that rightfully belonged to men and the heads of households. While medieval scholars have repeatedly shown the various avenues to power women trod in the Middle Ages, the Latin Mediterranean remained a patriarchal society where men regularly asserted power over women. Even female sovereigns, through birth or marriage, encountered suspicions and met constraints upon their power.³¹ The notion of a non-elite person assigned female at birth acting as a judge of men was likely untenable for the inquisitors. Scott Larson has analyzed Anne Hutchinson's trial in 1637 Puritan Boston, in which she was charged with and banished for spreading religious errors because she assumed the role of preacher as introducing the possibility of a "wholesale gender transformation"³² In a Puritan society where gender was "crafted through power relations," when Hutchinson preached, she acted like a husband and magistrate, which made those men who followed her become "wives through their listening."³³ Might something like this logic have been at work in the minds of medieval authorities? Not only was a woman wrongly assuming power over men in Eiximenis' example, but did that action destabilize the gender identity of those over

³¹ For the importance of queenship in Iberia, see Miriam Shadis, "Women, Gender, and Rulership in Romance Europe: The Iberian Case," *History Compass* 4 (2006): 1-7; Shadis, "Unexceptional Women: Power, Authority, and Queenship in Early Portugal," in *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100-1400*, ed. H. J. Tanner (Springer International Publishing, 2019): 247-70; Núria Silleras-Fernández, "The Queen, the Prince, and the Ideologue: Alonso Ortiz's Notions of Queenship at the Court of the Catholic Kings," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 46, no. 1 (2016): 393-415; Silleras-Fernández, "Iberian Queenship: Theory and Practice," in *Medieval Iberia: Unity in Diversity*, ed. Michael Gerli and Ryan Giles (Routledge, 2021): 303-324.

³² Scott Larson, "Laid Open: Examining Genders in Early America," in *Trans Historical*, 225.

³³ Larson, "Laid Open," 224.

which they exercised power? The assumptions of the authorities in 1409 or 1455, however, are not the same as ours. Were these people dressing to affirm their identity? Were they transing gender? We believe so.³⁴

While it is possible to read these moments as examples of women crossdressing as men in order to participate in the prerogatives of a culture that privileged masculine autonomy, we break explicitly with the medieval sources and the connection they make between gender expression and predatory sexuality or deception. Presenting as a man and having sex with a prosthetic penis was not, we argue, in the service of tricking anyone, but of living in accordance with their gender expression. The 1477 case of Katerina Hetzendorfer, who adopted a masculine identity in Speyer and constructed an “instrument with a red piece of leather, at the front filled with cotton, and a wooden stick stuck into it, and made a hole through the wooden stick, put a string through, and tied it round” to function as a penis, illustrates not only how individuals modified their bodies as well as their appearance but also the lengths to which some sought to confirm their gender. Hetzendorfer used this leather apparatus to urinate, eject sperm, and to engage in sex with the woman Else Muter, their long-term partner.³⁵ This tool functioned as more than a dildo for Hetzendorfer, as it did for the unnamed woman in Mallorca. Although these cases come from geographically distinct regions, they nevertheless indicate that premodern transmen could fashion an instrument to change their physical form to embody more literally a masculine identity. In our reading of the Catalan and

³⁴ Manion, *Female Husbands*, 11; DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 8-9.

³⁵ Helmet Puff, “Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzendorfer (1477),” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30 1 (2000), at 46, 44-5.

Mallorcan examples, which predate Hetzeldorfer's trial by a few decades, we upend Eiximenis's scathing accusation of "artifice," to suggest that the condemned's prosthetic penis was a necessary component of their identity. They were not faking life as a man, but attempting to live as one.

Kadin Kenningsen has reconceptualized the English sex worker John/Eleanor Rykener as a transgender woman, "because she lived and worked for periods of her life as a woman, and other people in her social milieu accepted her as such."³⁶ Similarly, textual clues from 1409 and 1455 permit us to see these people as transing gender, and living in a way that made them legible in male social roles, regardless of their sex assigned at birth. Despite the tragically violent ending to his life in 1409, our focus in Eiximenis's anecdote is the success with which the condemned had lived as a man before he was denounced-- he had an important career in government and married women twice, suggesting his community accepted him as a man for at least a significant breadth of time.

Just as we do not share the assumptions of the medieval authorities, we do not share their language. Mindful that "linguistic choices serve to reinscribe, consciously or not, certain paradigms," we are not limited by the hostility in medieval sources towards people who challenged expectations for normative gendered behavior.³⁷ Language is ever evolving, perhaps especially in response to a broadening recognition of the range

³⁶ Kadin Henningsen, "'Calling [herself] Eleanor': Gender Labor and Becoming a Woman in the Rykener Case." *Medieval Feminist Forum* 55, no. 1 (2019), 250.

³⁷ Spencer-Hall and Gutt, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects*, 282.

of gender identities people inhabit in the contemporary world.³⁸ Although our sources often insist on recognizing only the sex assigned at birth when discussing their subjects, we read closely for the clues offered by those subjects themselves and use pronouns that get us closer to their experiences. That said, we acknowledge too that we must be attentive to the differences “between categories, vocabularies, and imperatives” of being trans in the premodern past and in the present.³⁹ In reading for the possibility of trans identities in the past, we do not want to flatten those differences, but underscore the evidence of people who lived outside of the gender binary and to challenge the logic of the sources that condemned this as criminal or unnatural.

When the Venetian sex worker Rolandina of Ronchaia came before the judiciary in 1355, the scribe recording the interrogation almost always used a masculine pronoun to refer to them, despite the fact that they had lived much of their adult life presenting as a woman to their community.⁴⁰ During their interrogation, Ronchaia revealed that a decade before their arrest, they had lived as a man married to a woman and the marriage was unconsummated. Importantly, the document notes Ronchaia had no sexual appetite during their marriage. After their wife, who was now deceased, left

³⁸ See, for example, the decision to recognize “they” as a singular pronoun in English: <https://www.vox.com/2019/12/13/21011537/they-merriam-webster-pronouns-nonbinary-word-year> accessed 22 June 2021.

³⁹ DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 15.

⁴⁰ Roisin Cossar, Ruth Mazzo Karras, and Shannon McSheffrey, “The Case of Rolandina Ronchaia, a 14th - century transwoman?,” *Middle Ages for Educators*, July 22, 2020. Accessed 2 March 2021 <https://middleagesforeducators.princeton.edu/case-rolandina-ronchaia-14th-century-transwoman#block-5> We use the pronouns they/their for Rolandina Ronchaia, following Karras’s suggestion in her analysis of the case, in acknowledgement of the spectrum of possibilities the record of Rolandina’s life provides.

them, Ronchaia moved in with a relative in Padua. There, Ronchaia's "feminine face, voice, and gestures," led people to assume they were a woman, and Ronchaia, "taking the woman's part," had sex with at least three men. Later, they emigrated to Venice, where, living as a woman, Ronchaia sold sundries and sex. Like the "Frankish" women who participated in the sex trade in Alexandria, or the Aragonese women who lived together as sex workers in Palermo, Ronchaia was a migrant to the city where they sold sex. Ronchaia's immigrant status likely enabled them to live as a woman when they were assigned male at birth.⁴¹ Alongside the record of Margalida's torturous punishment, Ronchaia's interrogation opens up many interpretive avenues about gender identity and sexual orientation in the late medieval Mediterranean. We recall here Betancourt's call to explore the "spectrum of possibilities" inherent in Ronchaia's interrogation.⁴²

Understanding Rolandina Ronchaia as transing gender is the most likely reading of their record: they were assigned male at birth, and as an adult, after their marriage to a woman, they presented and had sex with men as a woman.⁴³ While this could mean that Ronchaia took the passive role in sexual encounters, and as their body was the penetrated one, it was assigned a female role; it could also mean that the men who had sex with Ronchaia understood they were having sex with a woman.⁴⁴ We find Jane

⁴¹ Helmut Puff has suggested that "geographical mobility" was essential for some people assigned female at birth to live as men. See "Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katerina Hetzeldorfer (1477)," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30 no. 1 (Winter, 2000), 49.

⁴² Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 16.

⁴³ Cossar, Karras, McSheffrey, "Rolandina Ronchaia."

⁴⁴ See Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 105-6.

Ward's formulation of gender labor useful here, as a reminder of the work that the people surrounding Ronchaia performed to enable Ronchaia's transing of gender. Ronchaia's gender presentation was, to cite Ward, a "co-production" of her community.⁴⁵ As part of a community of sex workers in Venice where some probably knew her circumstances, colleagues and friends likely directed particular clients her way. We should not assume that Ronchaia's clients were all duped men who did not have a clue that she was assigned male at birth. Among her clients, coworkers, and friends, were individuals who existed in the same consensus-reality that Ronchaia did and some men might have sought her out precisely because she was transing gender.⁴⁶ Like the person condemned in 1409 Iberia discussed above, then, whom we argued was transing gender because of his acceptance as a man in his social milieu, we are compelled to recognize Ronchaia as trans because of her navigation of their life in Venice as a woman.

Reading Ronchaia as transing gender enables us to avoid tagging them with a definitive, and possibly erroneous identity, but it does not clarify their sexual identity. In the interrogation, Ronchaia admits to having sex with a wife as a man, and then with a series of men as a woman. Perhaps they were bisexual. As literary scholar Valerie Traub has argued for the early modern period, sources attest to a broad range of acts

⁴⁵ Ward, "Gender Labor," 237.

⁴⁶ Michael Rocke has shown how same-gender desire communities created meeting places and gathered in specific locations, such as taverns, streets, workshops, and private homes that were known to all who took part and lived the lifestyle. Rocke also notes the friends and family members who facilitated these relationships and activities. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 148-194.

and locations and partners which rightfully decenters “penis-in-vagina” sex as the most prominent kind of sex premodern people had. She also reminds her readers that we cannot know what specific bodily acts meant to the people doing them in the premodern world.⁴⁷ Whatever the acts Ronchaia engaged in, as a married person, as a sex worker, in relationships consensual or not, their meaning to Ronchaia are lost. We wonder, though, about some of the silences in Ronchaia’s testimony. Ronchaia never admits to experiencing desire with any of their partners, no matter their sex nor the licitness of their interactions. This could be a tactic to gain some favor with their interrogators: by saying they felt no arousal during sex, Ronchaia might have thought to forestall condemnation as libidinous. There are other possibilities however. Might Ronchaia have been asexual, or ace, “a person who does not experience sexual attraction”?⁴⁸ Recent research suggests that people who identify as ace do participate in a wide range of sexual behaviors, so Ronchaia’s admission of sex with their wife and with other men would not be inconsistent with that definition.⁴⁹ We cannot know how or if Ronchaia experienced desire in any of their sexual encounters, but we raise this possibility here, cognizant of Betancourt’s call for historians “to shift away from an implicitly binary

⁴⁷ Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, (Pennsylvania: University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 14, 151-2.

⁴⁸ Asexual Visibility and Education Network <https://asexuality.org/?q=overview.html> , Retrieved on 4 March, 2021.

⁴⁹ Jessica J. Hille , Megan K. Simmons & Stephanie A. Sanders, “‘Sex’ and the Ace Spectrum: Definitions of Sex, Behavioral Histories, and Future Interest for Individuals Who Identify as Asexual, Graysexual, or Demisexual,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, 57:7 (2020), 813-823.

conception of sexuality,” and be attentive to the much wider range of gender expressions and desires in the past.⁵⁰

Ronchaia’s desires remain out of our ken, but they were certainly not alone in having sex with people with different gender identities. Although eunuchs in every Mediterranean culture were often suspected of seeking out sexual relations with other men, they were also portrayed as having sex and establishing relationships with women. Given that eunuchs could take on the active or passive role with a man or woman in sexual activities, we must recognize the possibility that some eunuchs surely were bisexual or pansexual.⁵¹ Nevertheless, eunuchs’ occupation of liminal spaces, especially those like the harem and the court, both of which were highly (though differently) gendered, meant that they were available as sex partners to men and to women. Their very presence in Byzantine society allowed for stories of women who dressed as men and were able to live as male eunuchs in monasteries.⁵² Given that eunuchs were not considered fully masculine because their identity as sex partners was malleable and they performed roles that were often not considered very manly, such as

⁵⁰ Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 120.

⁵¹ In opening the possibility of bisexuality of some eunuchs, we do not want to occlude the fact that they were castrated without their consent. The spectre of coercion is omnipresent in our discussion of their sexual behavior and it is entirely possible that their sexual desires and their sexual experiences did not align. In addition, castrates can still experience arousal and some, if only their testicles have been removed, can sustain an erection. See Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 98; Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 17-8, 21-2; Katherine Crawford, “Desiring Castrates, or How to Create Disabled Social Subjects,” *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 50-90; Tougher, “Images of Effeminate Men,” 96-97.

⁵² Betancourt argues that “the practice of cross-dressing as asceticism by women was more widespread than the textual narratives alone imply” in *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 99.

guarding the harem, working as entertainers, and practicing extreme asceticism as monks, it is not surprising that they embodied sexual ambiguity.

The prominent role that eunuchs played in the Byzantine and Islamic Mediterranean, and their visibility in Christian lands as *castrati* singers, underscores the presence of queerness, of otherness, of gender ambiguity within these societies. The theater and the entertainment provided at courts were spaces that also allowed for the transing of gender. Indeed, entertainers and performers were expected to change their gender through costume, speech, and bodily gestures since biological females were not permitted on the premodern stage. Italian plays and chivalric romances provide a landscape where gender is not fixed and sexual differences were “difficult to pinpoint” because sexual categories were not considered stable for an audience when genitalia “did not constitute a clear-cut sign of difference.”⁵³ For example, in the play *La calandria*, the two main characters Lidio and Santilla are twins of the opposite sex who in everyday life crossdress and use each other’s name. Finucci argues that the cross-dressing and the idea that sex parts are “independent of bodies” is an acknowledgement that gender is a production—not only put on by the two main characters but also by the male performer who is acting as a woman who is passing for a man or acting as a man who is passing for a woman.⁵⁴ Valeria Finucci underscores that in a society where dildos, prosthetic devices, the popularity of the “hermaphrodite,” and where the castrato and castration were not uncommon, this form of entertainment

⁵³ Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 5-6.

⁵⁴ See Finuccia, *The Manly Masquerade*, 190-1.

further reinforced beliefs in the fluidity of gender and sex. Although plays might imagine the construction or deconstruction of physical bodies, this does not only fit in the realm of fantasy. Finucci mentions that some men became famous for the female roles they played, which hints at the traces of trans women performers that may have disappeared from our extant sources.⁵⁵ Like the castrati opera singers who used a range of theatrical guises and were linked to assuming female characteristics and dress, individuals transing gender might have found a way to survive and succeed in theater spaces that demanded a performance of the gender identity they sought to live. While we may struggle to identify specific entertainers whose gender identity did not match their sex assigned at birth, Roland Betancourt likewise brings attention to the “glimmering possibilities of trans women” in Byzantine theaters that can only be detected via the transmisogynistic texts that focus on the gender variant behavior of performers and dancers.⁵⁶ Again, we see the productive possibilities of readings against the grain, whether in sources that speak about performers or the plays themselves.

Race, Enslavement, & Gender Queer Lives

The records of the Inquisition in Coimbra and Toledo provide other examples of the range of gender identities and sexualities in the Mediterranean. They also bring us into conversation with what C. Riley Snorton has termed “the transitivity and

⁵⁵ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 189-223. See also Robert L. Clark and Claire Sponsler, “Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama,” *New Literary History* 28, no. 2 (1997): 319-44.

⁵⁶ Roland Betancourt, “Where Are All the Trans Women in Byzantium?” in *Trans Historical*, 297-321.

transversality of blackness and transness.”⁵⁷ His work makes explicit the ways enslavement or “captive flesh... gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being.”⁵⁸ While he focuses his analysis on the US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the imbrications of blackness and transness, of racialized gender identities, are visible in the premodern Mediterranean.⁵⁹ In 1556, an enslaved person, originally from Benin and purchased in Lisbon, was denounced to the inquisition as a female-attired sex-worker Vittoria who: “solicits boys, young men and migrant workers who happen to pass by. He leads them behind the house of Alonso de Torres, to a dark place behind some ruined houses, addressing them with gestures in the manner of a woman who intends to fornicate with them. (...) Seven or eight men were seen to disappear with him whilst others peeped and laughed out [on the street].”⁶⁰ With the salient difference in the source’s insistence on Vittoria’s identity as a Black woman, there are some striking comparisons to Rolandina’s case here, both because the subjects make money through sex work and because witnesses point to the way the subjects have sex in the manner of women. Both are also assigned male at birth and

⁵⁷ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 5.

⁵⁸ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 57.

⁵⁹ For discussion of the association of blackness and enslavement, see Steven Epstein, “Attitudes Toward Blackness,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 2, ed. Craig Perry, et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 214-239; Debra Blumenthal, *Enemies and Familiars: Slavery and Mastery in Fifteenth-Century Valencia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 272-277; Barker, *Most Precious Merchandise*, 49.

⁶⁰ François Soyer, *Ambiguous Gender in Early Modern Spain and Portugal: Inquisitors, Doctors and the Transgression of Gender Norms* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 21.

dress and present themselves to the world as women. It should not surprise our readers then, that we read them as transing gender.

This is not how all historians have interpreted the Coimbra inquisitorial record. François Soyer suggests this person is an example of an early modern transvestite.⁶¹ Such an interpretation reflects the logic of the inquisitorial record: The subject is given the name Antonio, who is referred to with male pronouns. Given other clues from that same record, however, we suggest that transvestism is not the most appropriate lens through which to understand Antonio's experience. First, Antonio used the name Vittoria, clearly marked in its early modern context as a woman's name. Second, multiple witnesses noted that Vittoria acted as a woman "in every way." Finally and most significantly, Vittoria's own testimony was unequivocal: "I am a Black woman, not a Black man."⁶² As an enslaved person with no legal bodily autonomy, facing an aggressively hostile audience with the power to torture and kill, to remain steadfast about her identity was a powerful move. Vittoria's testimony was a refusal to concede control of her identity to the Inquisition, and simultaneously a rejection of her enslaved state. In a legal culture that ceded control over Vittoria's body to her enslaver, her identity statement rejected that premise, and reclaimed control over her body for herself. Even as we acknowledge the constructed nature of the inquisitorial record, we defer to Vittoria's self-identification. Although the inquisitorial examiners of Vittoria's body found no bodily evidence that Vittoria was a woman, and thus had her flogged and sentenced

⁶¹ Soyer, *Ambiguous Gender*, 20.

⁶² Soyer, *Ambiguous Gender*, 21.

to a life rowing the galleys,⁶³ we suggest that Vittoria was trans. Her sex assigned at birth did not determine her gender identity and her assumption of women's clothing was not an act of tranvestitism, but an act of presenting herself to the world as she wanted to be perceived. Even from within the hostile sources, we can see that her gender presentation was consistent-- she acted as a woman, she called herself by a woman's name, and she had sex as a woman. As a matter of interpretation, we read against and across the extant record to privilege the recorded words of the historical subject, distorted though they are, over the condemnatory denouncers and examiners interested in maintaining a strict gender binary.

The question of cross-dressing and gender identity weaves through Islamicate literature as well. Sahar Amer has analyzed chronicles of the medieval Islamicate world alongside the corpus of medieval Arabic erotic literature attentive to "lesbian-like" (pace Judith Bennett) women, and in so doing, she has highlighted numerous examples of girls who cross-dressed as boys, and women who cross-dressed as men. In the ninth-century court in Baghdad, some enslaved girls donned boys' clothing and occasionally sported fake mustaches (previous scholarship had seen these figures only as competing with boys for the attention of men), which "soon became the cultural fashion eagerly imitated by upper class Baghdadi women."⁶⁴ *A Thousand and One Nights* and other Arabic romances tell the tales of women who dress as men and show off their "frequent obsession with warrior activities and their aversion or categorical refusal to

⁶³ Soyer, *Ambiguous Gender*, 22.

⁶⁴ Sahar Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 18 no. 2 (May, 2009), 226.

marry (often until defeated in combat)...”⁶⁵ Sahar offers these examples to extend the possibilities of seeing lesbians in Islamic sources beyond moments when women express desire for, or have sex with, other women, and to push beyond a heteronormative reading that assumes all sexual competition must be oriented towards an opposite-sex object. We wonder, though, if these examples hint at moments where sex between women was not the goal, but living as a man was. Might these crossdressers be transing gender, not for a moment on the battlefield or for easier access to another woman’s body, but because the clothing and pursuits of a man better aligned with their identity?⁶⁶

In 1587 another well-known inquisitorial trial similarly revealed the Mediterranean intersections of enslavement, racialized identities, cross-dressing, and transness, while also leaving us with questions of how best to interpret the remaining documentation. In Toledo, “a woman in man’s garb” appeared before the inquisitor Lope de Mendoza on the charges of sorcery and disrespecting the sacrament of marriage. The interrogation named the subject Elena de Céspedes, the child of an enslaved African woman and a Christian father, herself branded on both cheeks, and enslaved until her manumission at

⁶⁵ Amer, “Medieval Arab Lesbians,” 226.

⁶⁶ Abdulhamit Arvas suggests that scholars have incorrectly interpreted the figure of the *köçek* (dancers assigned male at birth who performed to male audiences dressed in fashions associated with women) in Ottoman history as cross-dressers, as female substitutes, within a gender binary. Arvas, by contrast, suggests the dancers “did not imitate women; nor did they temporarily travel to the other end of the gender spectrum in their performances, but feely danced in between with their own styles and gender presentations while intentionally obscuring their assigned gender.” see “Performing and Desiring Gender Variance in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire,” *In Trans Histories*, 109.

the age of ten.⁶⁷ The ubiquity and consequences of enslavement throughout the Mediterranean intersect here as they did in Vittoria's case; Elena was an illegitimate child born into slavery, whose manumission was dependent on her father's recognition of paternity. This is in distinction to Vittoria, who was enslaved at the time of her inquisitorial investigation and trial. Yet, in spite of her manumitted status, Elena's visibly marked face and mixed-race skin could never fully pass for Christian whiteness and meant they could not be fully integrated into dominant society. Elena's body, then, represents what Marisa Fuentes has called a "mutilated historicity" where the bodies of the enslaved become "inscribed with the text/violence of slavery."⁶⁸ And although slave societies allow some degree of assimilation and passing for the formerly enslaved, Lamonte Aidoo makes the point that "mimicry of whiteness in the end can never really be whiteness," and notes the "gendered dimension of racial complicity" where the manumission of enslaved women and their social mobility is less threatening in a patriarchal society that controlled the degrees to which it conferred racial membership.⁶⁹

Early in life, Elena had lived according to the racial and gender ideals of the enslaver. At sixteen, she was married as a woman to a mason, with whom she had a son. Twenty-four years later after stints as a tailor, hosier, soldier, and finally a surgeon licensed to bleed, purge, and cut, the subject married again, this time as Eleno, a man,

⁶⁷ For an analysis of Céspedes's claims of hermaphroditism, see Israel Burshatin, "Written on the Body: Slave or Hermaphrodite in Sixteenth-Century Spain," in *Queer Iberia*, 420-456; Sherry Velasco, *Lesbians in Early Modern Spain*, 75-83.

⁶⁸ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 16.

⁶⁹ Aidoo, *Slavery Unseen*, 118-9.

to a woman, María.⁷⁰ According to the interrogation, the vicar who performed the second marriage raised the question of gender identity when he asked if the prospective groom was a “capon,” or castrated chicken, here analogized to a human eunuch, because Eleno lacked a beard or any body hair.⁷¹ What unfolded in the interrogation was Eleno’s claim, “I am and have been a hermaphrodite (*hermafrodito*), and at the time I married María, the masculine sex prevailed in me. I was naturally a man and had all the necessary parts of a man in order to marry....”⁷² In the Céspedes case, then, the intersection of transness and race meant that Elena’s conscious act of transgression in living as a man violated the agreement between the dominant society and the racialized subject in assuming a limited degree of white Christian privilege that they were permitted as a formerly enslaved woman. It is not a surprise that Eleno’s race informed how people perceived them. Israel Burshatin highlights how Eleno’s appearance was read as that of a Morisco bandit (*monfi*) and interpreted as threatening. He underscores how Eleno’s skin color and slave brand generated a great deal of animosity and cultural

⁷⁰ Richard Kagan and Abigail Dyer, eds., *Inquisitorial Inquiries: Brief Lives of Secret Jews and Other Heretics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 36- 43. Another well-studied example of transing gender in Early Modern Spain is that of Catalina de Erauso. See Sonia Pérez-Villanueva, *The Life of Catalina de Erauso, the Lieutenant Nun: An Early Modern Autobiography* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014); Nerea Aresti, “The Gendered Identities of the ‘Lieutenant Nun,’” Rethinking the Story of a Female Warrior in Early Modern Spain,” *Gender & History* 19 no. 3 (November, 2007), 401-418, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2007.00491.x>

⁷¹ Kagan and Dyer, *Inquisitorial Inquiries*, 43.

⁷² Kagan and Dyer, *Inquisitorial Inquiries*, 47.

anxiety, and also prompted their first arrest as a Morisco (Muslim converts to Islam and their descendants) outlaw.⁷³

There is also a connection between race and sexual alterity, particularly in the depiction of monstrous races and hermaphroditic bodies that were associated with “Saracens,” Jews, and Africans that conveyed unnaturalness, grotesqueness, and cultural difference.⁷⁴ Medieval thinkers also linked non-binary bodies to sodomy, which aligns well with the suspicion of inquisitors that Eleno had had unnatural sex with his wife María.⁷⁵ Whether Eleno was intersex is ambiguous in the interrogation, but it raises the question whether Eleno had internalized racial discourses about bodily and sexual difference. Eleno’s purposeful self-identification as a hermaphrodite, written into the inquisitorial record, was deeply embedded in authorities like Cicero, Augustine, and Pliny, which supported the claim that hermaphroditism was natural, if rare.⁷⁶ Stories about young women who sprouted penises in adolescence, also rooted in readings of Pliny, circulated in early modern medical literature and were further publicized by

⁷³ Burshatin, “Written on the Body,” 437; see also Velasco, *Lesbians in Early Modern Spain*, 78-9

⁷⁴ DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 40-69.

⁷⁵ Burshatin argues that Eleno was charged with contempt for the Church and its sacraments because the charge of sodomy was so “messy” given Eleno’s claim of an intersex body. Nevertheless, the suspicion of sodomy took up a great deal of the investigation. Burshatin, “Written on the Body,” 424-7. For the link between sodomy and a non-binary body, see also DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 66.

⁷⁶ Israel Burshatin, “Elena alias Eleno: Genders, Sexuality, and Race in the Mirror of Natural History in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996), 113-114.

philosophes like Montaigne.⁷⁷ As Igor de Souza has recently argued, de Céspedes escaped a conviction for sodomy because “their actual crime(s) were indeterminate—perhaps permissible, perhaps not—because Elenx’s sex was indeterminate.”⁷⁸ So Eleno, a trained medical practitioner with a significant personal library of medical texts, would have had the intellectual chops to make their own body and its actions legible to the Inquisition while also protecting themselves from its most violent application.⁷⁹ By insisting their body and the sex it had was natural and not sodomitical, Eleno evaded a death sentence. Perhaps, too, Eleno was tapping into a medieval legal discourse around intersex bodies with this argument before the Inquisition. In a *consilia* (legal opinion) on a disputed inheritance case, the Italian lawyer Baldus de Ubaldis suggested that as long as a person made a choice and stuck with it, “a person with both male and female sexual traits should choose their own path as a man or a woman, especially after that person had reached the age of puberty and had a firm sense of their own masculinity or femininity.”⁸⁰ While there is no evidence Eleno was familiar with Baldus’s *consilia*, his assertion that “at the time of his marriage, the masculine sex prevailed in me” would suggest he was living out Baldus’s precept that individual choice should animate how an intersex person should live in the world. We know that Eleno claimed a

⁷⁷ Thomas Lacquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 126-128.

⁷⁸ De Souza, “Elenx de Céspedes,” 37 and 43.

⁷⁹ Velasco notes that twenty-four out of twenty-seven books in Eleno’s personal library were medical texts, and argues Eleno must have been familiar with “anatomical description of the hypertrophied clitoris believed to be capable of penetrating a woman.” See, *Lesbians in Early Modern Spain*, 78.

⁸⁰ DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 128.

male identity and that a series of women with whom Eleno had sex suggested they understood they were having sex with a man. By reinforcing Eleno's masculine identity, these female sexual partners were performing gender labor on Eleno's behalf. This might well reflect that they understood and supported Eleno's transing of gender and were willing to work with him to "bolster [his] gender identity."⁸¹

Individual choice is one factor, but so too were prevailing social norms and pressures. In Baalbek (modern-day Lebanon) in 1353-4, the historian Ibn Kathir encountered an intersex person who was socialized as a girl, and, like Eleno, learned embroidery and weaving, professions gendered feminine in the medieval Mediterranean. When a "tiny penis" appeared in the unnamed person's fifteenth year, the local governor celebrated this felicitous event by gendering the person as male with the gift of a soldier's uniform.⁸² The transition from needleworker to soldier was applauded in Lebanon and condemned in Iberia, which might have something to do with the source material that contains information about their lives: a history and a trial. Differing legal approaches in Islamic and Romano-canon law might also explain the various receptions of intersex people. Paula Sanders has argued that medieval Islamic law had an explicit interest in establishing whether a person born intersex was male or female, because of the gender-based differences in obligatory practices within Islam. For medieval Islamic jurists, "Human beings had to be either male or female; sometimes they seemed to be neither, but they could not be both. The difficulty lay in establishing a

⁸¹ Ward, "Gender Labor," 237.

⁸² Yosef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money, and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34.

place for the hermaphrodite until its primary set of organs could be determined, that is, the set of organs that had legal value and to which sex would be attributed.”⁸³ When the penis appeared in Baalbek, it affirmed that the person was male, and the military uniform further established that identity for the community. In a sense, the celebration was a form of gender labor for the former needleworker.

In fourteenth-century Catalonia, we see almost the opposite unfold, when Guillem Castelló petitioned to end his marriage, because his wife Berengaria was not able to have sex, and thus unable to bear a child, which was a central expectation for female-identified people in the Latin West. According to the records of Berengaria’s examination, she possessed both male and female genitalia, and so, as DeVun has noted, she would be “sex variant or intersex” in the contemporary world.⁸⁴ There is no further record of Berengaria’s fate, or that of her marriage, but having both a penis and testicles as well as a vulva meant that she could not fulfill a female obligation in a canonical marriage, and was thus threatened with its end. It’s reasonable to assume, within a culture that expected women to bear children, Berengaria would have faced significant obstacles if she remained in her village. If her marriage ended because she could not have sex, might she have remained single or have taken advantage of Mediterranean mobility to move elsewhere and start life in some other form?

As with the child in Baalbek, we do not know how Berengaria perceived herself. Perhaps both were compelled by social norms to live in a gender identity that did not

⁸³ Paula Sanders, “Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, edited by Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 77.

⁸⁴ For Berengaria’s story, see DeVun, *The Shape of Sex*, 1-4.

align with their self-perception. We learn about Berengaria and the Lebanese child from sources which made declarations about them— in Lebanon, a ceremony and a military uniform determined the child was male, and a physical examination and a court case unsettled Berengaria’s identity as a woman. While the reception and acceptance of intersex people clearly depended on local context, religious and cultural norms informed expectations for gendered behavior and the possibilities available to intersex people.

Even though we have more evidence of Eleno’s awareness and articulation of what it meant to live in an intersex body in the premodern Mediterranean than we do of the Lebanese child or Berengaria, ultimately an identity was forced upon them after experiencing the terror of multiple interrogations. Because the inquisitors did not accept Eleno’s identity nor the argument that Eleno’s life was entirely natural, Eleno was found guilty of both sorcery and of disrespecting the sacrament of marriage. The sentence was significant: two hundred lashes, appearance at an auto de fe, and a ten-year term as a surgeon at a charity hospital, for which Eleno would receive no pay, and during which Eleno had to be attired as a woman.⁸⁵ Intriguingly, the director of the hospital where Eleno served out this sentence pleaded with the Toledan inquisitors to reassign Eleno because the hoards of patients who wanted to consult with him caused a “great disturbance and tumult.”⁸⁶ Eleno’s trial gave him an aura of celebrity that made him a desired doctor. Perhaps, too, the many people who sought him out as a medical practitioner shows that premodern people were more accepting of ambiguity around gender presentation than they’ve been given credit for being. And perhaps, others who

⁸⁵ Kagan and Dyer, *Inquisitorial Inquiries*, 53.

⁸⁶ Kagan and Dyer, *Inquisitorial Inquiries*, 57.

were transing gender sought out Eleno as a practitioner who might be particularly capable of caring for their specific medical needs. Whether attired according to a female or male gender presentation, Eleno was a sought-after physician whose patients trusted his medical judgment. Taking our cue from the sixteenth-century patients, we do not want to amplify hostility of the inquisition's sentence by denying Eleno's own identification, and we also want to open up the possibilities Eleno's life allows. Since Eleno lived most of his adult life as a man, taking on the professions of tailor and soldier and surgeon, all gendered male in the premodern period, should we not consider he was transing gender and his gender identity shifted after his first marriage and childbirth experience? Eleno's own telling of his identity points us in that direction, as he argued before the inquisition that in the process of birthing a child, he also birthed his penis.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Read alongside each other and placed in their Mediterranean context, the lives of Rolandina Ronchaia, Margalida, Vittoria, and Eleno de Cépedes show how late medieval people away from the places of their birth could also, at least momentarily, live outside the boundaries determined by their sex at birth. The literary works produced in the premodern Mediterranean offered characters who transed gender, hagiographies venerated those who did, caliphal and imperial audiences were entertained by dancers and plays performed by people transing gender. This cultural production might have

⁸⁷ Israel Burshatin, "Written on the Body: Slave or Hermaphrodite in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, edited by Josiah Blackmore and Gregory Hutcheson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 435.

created spaces of connection for people transing gender who were not examined by doctors or persecuted by the Inquisition. Although we do not want to downplay the fear and violence that transing gender could occasion, we want to highlight how people transing gender could spend years of their lives embodying a gender identity that did not accord with their sex assigned at birth. It is worth repeating that there are likely many more folks transing gender whose lives were not captured in the archives.

Scholars of the medieval Mediterranean have emphasized the region as a space for mobility— of ideas, of goods, of bodies. We suggest that this movement opened possibilities for those who were transing gender to go in search of accepting communities.⁸⁸ Perhaps Margalida purchased her berth on the ship from Mallorca to Valencia as a woman, hoping to pull into port of the new city in a presentation that was in accordance with her identity, starting off in a new city as she hoped to continue. Vittoria’s arrival on the Iberian peninsula was no choice at all, and her enslavement was a core feature of Mediterranean society. Was her transing of gender a refusal both of her enslaver and of the inquisition to determine who she was? The ease of movement within the Mediterranean could be mobilized as a survival strategy, letting people like

⁸⁸ Eric Dursteler’s *Renegade Women* shows that “Mediterranean connectedness” played a role in the lives of women seeking to transgress boundaries in order to free themselves from circumstances that “limited their power to act” so that they could “refashion their lives.” Another example of Mediterranean connectedness is in Rome, where Gary Ferguson found a group of twenty-seven migrant, working class adult men and youths, who were mostly Spanish and Portuguese. They had formed a “brotherhood” that gathered frequently to socialize, drink, and to perform a wedding ceremony that mimicked the Christian ritual of marriage in a church in which male couples acknowledged a relationship with each other and engaged in sex. See Dursteler, *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 108-10; Ferguson, *Same-Sex Marriage in Renaissance Rome*, 90-94, 97, 136-9.

Rolandina move on when they had to escape a life that no longer felt possible to sustain. Given the passage of time, the hostile sources, the interrogations under torture, and the potential for judicial murder that awaited those whose gender presentation did not align with religious and cultural expectations for their sex assigned at birth, a gesture towards interpretive humility seems especially apt. We cannot know what having sex, getting married, or dressing in the morning meant to Rolandina, Margalida, Vitoria or Eleno but their transing of gender speaks to the necessity of attending to the intersections of sexuality and gender identity with race, religious difference, enslavement, and mobility as we grapple with definitions of what made the medieval Mediterranean a definable region.