

# HEROINES IN STRANGE COSTUMES

## Female Transvestism/Cross-dressing in Medieval Hagiographies

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### *Introduction*

Writing on transvestism/cross-dressing seems to be a very contemporary phenomenon, actualized in (post)modern queer and gender theories. In that regard, it sounds very unusual to analyze it within the context of ecclesiastical hagiographies. Contrary to popular belief, medieval culture found an innovative way to integrate the sometimes very heterogeneous elements into a harmonious structure of Sainly legend. In this article, I would like to examine what factors were the most important for their development.

In the first part, I will give a short overview of the most important medieval legends that include a motif of cross-dressing. In the second chapter, I will question the most important scientific theories that seek to explain the phenomenon of transvestism/cross-dressing in medieval hagiographies, especially those theories oriented to ancient gnostic teachings, ecclesiastical discipline and social determinants of medieval society. The paper concludes by proposing a different theoretical account and set of new starting points for sociological and theological understanding of female transvestism/cross-dressing in Sainly legends.

### 1. *Transvestism and its descendants*

One problem of understanding female transvestism/cross-dressing arises from a conceptual confusion. Although a large number of researchers use the term “transvestism” in its literal sense, i. e. as a synonym for cross-dressing,<sup>1</sup>

1 Vgl. Salih, Sara: *Versions of Virginty in Late Medieval England*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 2001; Beresford, Andrew M.: *The Legends of the Holy Harlots. Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish literature*, Woodbridge: Tamesis 2007; Winstead, Karen A.: *Chaste Passions. Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2000; Hotchkiss, Valerie R.: *Clothes Make the Man. Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe*, New York, NY: Garland Publishing 2000; Dekker, Rudolph / Lotte van der Pol: *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe*, London: Macmillan 1989.

in general use it has an additional sexual connotation. Merriam–Webster dictionary defines a transvestite as “a person and especially a male who adopts the dress and often the behavior typical of the opposite sex especially for purposes of emotional or sexual gratification”<sup>2</sup>. This specific meaning originates from early 20<sup>th</sup> century works of Magnus Hirschfeld,<sup>3</sup> who coined the new term from latin words “trans–” and “vestitus” (literally: cross–dressed) to describe the particular sexual phenomena. Despite this modern delimitation, some forms of cross–dressing have been present in many cultures without distinctively sexual elements. Theme of our study deals with one of them within the context of hagiographies.

Limitations of our research do not allow us to engage into a detailed discussion on the justifiability of use of the aforementioned terms. In order to avoid confusion, we will use the term “transvestism” in its literal meaning, interchangeable with the similar term “cross–dressing”. The scope of this study is focused on medieval hagiographies that include “intriguing” narratives on female Saints dressed in manly clothes. Putting an adjective under quotation marks implies that its provocative character is a product of later periods. Nowadays, cross–dressing is almost exclusively recognized as culturally subversive and controversial performance. On behalf of postmodern gender theories, cross–dressing has been used as a demonstration of a fluid nature of identity. On the other side, changing the clothes in Christian hagiography indicates something completely different — a strong religious affiliation. The sole fact that those legends can be found within a corpus of moral–didactical prose suggests that recipients of that time did not read them as socially or religiously subversive texts. It is interesting to notice that something subversive to a modern reader could have been read as affirmative by a medieval reader.

## 2. *Legenda Aurea*

Our main source of medieval legends is “*Legenda aurea*”, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Among them, legends of Saint Pelagia,

- 2 Dictionary and Thesaurus – Merriam–Webster Online: Transvestism. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transvestism> (21.10.2011).
- 3 Hirschfeld, Magnus: *Transvestites. The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*, Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books 1991/1910 (original title: *Die Transvestiten. Eine Untersuchung über den erotischen Verkleidungstrieb mit umfangreichem casuistischen und historischen Material*).
- 4 Voragine, Jacobi: *Legenda aurea vulgo historia lombardica dicta ad optimorum librorum fidem* (editio secunda), Lipsiae: Impensis librariae Arnoldianae 1850. Available online at: <http://www.archive.org/details/legendaareavulg00jacouoft> (29.10.2011) English translation available online at: <http://www.catholic-forum.com/Saints/golden000.htm> (29.10.2011) <http://Saints.sqpn.com/the-golden-legend-by-blessed-jacobus-de-voragine/> (29.10.2011) and <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/> (29.07.2011).

Eugenia and Marina are of our special interest. The same structural model can be found in some other medieval legends, e. g. legend of Saint Castissima, Theodora etc. Those Saints did some amazing heroic deeds in order to preserve or achieve chastity and holiness. These deeds include ascetic life, long probation, acceptance of injustice etc. The heaviest burden those female Saints had to bear was a secret of their real sex. In proceeding paragraphs, the short summary of legends will be presented.

## 2.1 Pelagienne

The golden legend informs us that Pelagia/Pelagienne was “the foremost and noblest of the women of Antioch, full of riches in all things. She was right fair of body, noble of habit, vain and variable of courage, and not chaste of body.”<sup>5</sup> Moved by preaching of holy bishop Nonnon, she unexpectedly converted and asked God for mercy. On the day of her baptism the devil cried saying: “O what violence I suffer of this old servant of God. O violence, O evil old age, accursed be the day in which thou wert born contrary to me, for thou hast taken away my greatest hope.”<sup>6</sup> Soon after, she fled away secretly. She took a habit of a hermit and set herself up in a little cell on the Mount of Olives. It is here that she served God in great abstinence as brother Pelagius, renowned after holy life. Only after her death, monks found out that she was a woman.

## 2.2 Eugenia

Legend of Saint Eugenia can be found in the Scottish Legendary, a large collection of Sainly lives from 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century. Some scholars suggest that this legend was not particularly widespread because it survived only in one manuscript — MS Gg.2.6 achieved at Cambridge University.<sup>7</sup> This version seems to be an extended version of an original, very concise legend included in the Golden Legend.<sup>8</sup> Legend says to us that Eugenia was educated Alexandrian noblewoman that converted to Christianity after reading epistles of Saint Paul and was encouraged by small Christian community nearby Alexandria. Compared with Christian teaching, all her earlier knowledge in philosophy, rhetoric and poetry suddenly seemed to Eugenia as futile. At the

5 The Golden Legend: The Life of Pelagienne. <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/golden286.htm> (29.07.2011).

6 Ibid.

7 Winstead, Karen A.: *Chaste Passions. Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2000, 70.

8 The Golden Legend.

same time, two of her school friends, Protus and Hyacinth, also embraced Christianity. Together they decided to enter the monastery dressed as monks. The Abbot asked Eugenia who she was, and she responded that she was a man. At that moment, God revealed him who she truly was, but the abbot said: "You may well call yourself a man, even though you are a woman, because your deeds are manly."<sup>9</sup> All three companions lived holy life, but Eugenia surpassed all others. While still pretending to be a male monk, she cured a local woman of serious illness. The woman, however, fell in love with that beautiful "monk" and made sexual advances towards Eugenia. When she saw that she had been rejected, the woman accused Eugenia/Eugene for a sexual harassment. Eugenia was then taken to the court, presided by her father. During the trial, her real female identity was revealed, and she was exonerated. Legend continues that her father also converted to the Christian faith and soon became Bishop of Alexandria, but the emperor executed him because of his religious affiliation. Eugenia and the rest of her household moved to Rome where she converted many and died as a martyr.

### 2.3 Marina<sup>10</sup>

Falsely accused for adultery, she had similar problems as Eugenia, but her reaction on denouncement was very different, and she never revealed her true identity. She even accepted accusations and took care of raising a child, who was presumed to be an illegitimate son of a "monk" Marinus. After several years, she came back to monastery, while still enduring accusations and accepting the hardest jobs as a mean of penance. Only after death did the brothers find out that monk Marinus was a Saint woman.

### 2.4 Why women wear pants?

Authors who wrote about this topic suggested several explanations for a phenomenon of cross-dressing in Sainly legends. Writing in 19<sup>th</sup> century, Herman Usener proposed a theory of pagan residues which stayed very influential over a century. He saw the roots of these legends in the pagan cult of the Aphrodite of Cyprus, bisexual goddess and idol of androgyny. Man and women offered their sacrifices to this goddess dressed in clothes of the opposite gender.<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, this theory is the least plausible, mostly because it

9 Winstead, *Chaste Passions*, 73.

10 *The Golden Legend: The Life of Eugenia*.  
<http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/golden140.htm> (21.07.2011.).

11 Salisbury, Joyce E.: *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*, London / New York: Verso 1992, 108–110.

overestimates an impact of Greek mythology in the period of early Christianity. As Bremmer showed, development of classical philosophy with its radical critic of mythology influenced Greek worldview in such a measure that old conceptions of gods could not be renewed.<sup>12</sup> The fact that Christian Apologetics did not engage in disputation with pagan mythology, but with philosophical schools, illustrates the balance of persuasive power in the first centuries of Common Era. Having in mind that early Christianity was predominantly suspicious about pagan tradition makes it highly unlikely that mythology played such an important role.

Marie Delacourt also expressed criticism regarding Usener's theory. She suggests that the theme of cross-dressing could not simply be a pagan heritage, but a product of Christian imaginary. Delcourt sees the origins of these manifestations in apocryphal writing. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* are of her special interest. Changing of clothes, Delcourt argues, presents a symbolical break with female past and rejection of normative rules of gender.<sup>13</sup> In other words, adapting male clothes, Thecla appropriates itself a role of an independent preacher of Gospel, on the same level with male proponents.

Delacourt's insights notwithstanding, deeper analysis of this apocryphal writing leaves us with the different impression. Thecla's cross-dressing in this narrative is mentioned only once, in context of traveling (Pth 9,25), while there is no doubt that Thecla preached Gospel before that episode (Pth 9,21s<sup>14</sup>). It is after this short intermezzo that she declares herself as a daughter (Pth 10,8) and woman (Pth 11,7). This is to say, that the emancipation thesis could not be adequately supported with text elements. The more probable reason for this cross-dressing would be common dangers for travelers, especially female, during long trips. Salisbury also noticed that this theory does not account for the popularity of this and similar stories not only among women, but also among male readers who used to transcribe them for centuries.<sup>15</sup>

Elisabeth Abbott follows a different intellectual alley, arguing that the elements of cross-dressing present a symbolic emancipation of a woman amidst the misogynic society that idealized celibacy as a culturally superior way of living and a privileged path of salvation.<sup>16</sup> For Abbot, cross-dressing is a way of rejection of the inferior position and female role in the society:

12 Bremmer, Jan N.: *Greek Religion*: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006, 55–69.

13 Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, 108–110.

14 Hone, William (Hg.): *The Apocryphal New Testament*, London: Printed for William Hone, Ludgate Hill, 1820. Electronic edition within Bibleworks 7.

15 Salisbury: *Church Fathers*, 108–110.

16 Abbott, Elizabeth: *A History of Celibacy*, Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press 2001, 47–50.

Other than celibacy, the adoption of male garb and identity had rewards that intelligent and intense women such as Castissima and Pelagia must have greatly appreciated. As men, they shuck off not merely womanly obligations but also their inferior status. The lowliest monk was nonetheless a man and, as such, permitted freedoms and measure of respect no woman could dream of. For these women, life as celibate monks was also empowering, and they wrestled from it respect and reverence usually reserved for males. Their celibacy was the most delicious of all: transformative and liberating, and the instrument of its own success.<sup>17</sup>

In short, Abbott argues that Saints like Pelagia utilized the privileged institution of male celibacy in order to overcome the troubles of their own gender. Although the celibacy could be perceived as an important motive in our legends, Abbott's conclusion is highly inconsistent with the texts. All of the legends put a strong emphasis on the role of obedience and diligence. In Marina's case, it is even directly described that she accepts typical female duties of cleaning and nourishing a child.

Some theorists, on the other hand, see gnostic traditions as a primary inspiration for cross-dressing elements in Saintly legends. It is worth to mention that gnosis was not a systematic religious movement. It consisted of many different streams, convergent in some basic anthropological and metaphysical teachings.

Wayne Meeks<sup>18</sup> saw an explanation for the popularity of these stories in gnostic influence that celebrated androgynous ideal of person. The most important scripture in our context is *The Gospel of Thomas*, apocryphal collection of Jesus' sayings, dated somewhere between 120–140 A. D. Its Coptic version has been discovered within large gnostic library in Nag Hamady.<sup>19</sup> In saying number 114 we can read:

Shimon Kefa says to them: Let Mariam depart from among us, for women are not worthy of the life. Yeshua says: Behold, I myself shall inspire her so that I make her male, in order that she also shall become a living spirit like you males. For every female who becomes male, shall enter the Sovereignty of the Heavens. (G. Thom. 114)<sup>20</sup>

Excerpts from some other apocryphal scriptures suggest the same:

[...] Salome saith: Until when shall men continue to die? [...] and it is advisedly that the Lord makes an answer: So long as women bear *children*. [...] When Salome inquired when the things concerning which she asked should be known, the Lord

17 Ebd., 81.

18 Meeks, Wayne: *The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity*, in: *History of Religions* 13/3 (1974) 185–186.

19 Klauck, Hans-Josef: *Apocryphal Gospels. An Introduction*, London / New York: T&T Clark 2003, 108.

20 English Translation of the Gospel of Thomas by the Ecumenical Coptic Project, available at: <http://www.metalog.org/files/thomas.html> (01.05.2011).

said: When ye have trampled on the garment of shame, and when the two become one and the male with the female is neither male nor female. (The Gospel of the Egyptians, 64–66. 92)<sup>21</sup>

We can see that the hostility towards the body (and sexuality in general) is at the center of gnostic teaching where even clothing serves as a significant metaphor. It represents abandonment of earthly bodily constraints and an acceptance of the spiritual path.<sup>22</sup> Gnostic ideal would be a reconciliation of heterogeneous elements.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, an asexual androgynous being that abandoned earthly “garment” would present a gnostic spiritual model. Nevertheless, we still must check whether this theory really gives a convincing explanation for our stories. Although cross-dressed virgins clearly yearned to achieve a state of spiritual purification, this is still far away from an androgynous perspective. As we could see, Saints under consideration do not implement a new “male” element into themselves, in order to become perfected. Disguise, as presented in legends, in no case represents the shift of the ontological structure. To the reader, it is always clear that the person in question is a female. Narrative structure of the legend also put forth that the most important transformation happened even before the period of cross-dressing, i. e. those episodes serve primarily as a challenge to conversion that had been described at the beginning. Salisbury also noticed that gnostic theory could explain only one part of possible variations. If we accept androgynous ideal as a motive for these legends, it would be reasonable to expect at least some legends that describe a male cross-dressing, an element completely absent from hagiographies.<sup>24</sup> An additional surprising fact is the total non-existence of

21 James, Montague R.: *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1924, 10–12.

22 Yeshua says: When you take off your garments without being ashamed, and take your garments and place them under your feet to tread on them as the little children do — then [shall you behold] the Son of the Living-One, and you shall not fear. (G. Thom. 37), <http://www.metalog.org/files/thomas.html> (21.07.2011); also: The Lord said, “The governors and the administrators possess garments granted only for a time, which do not last. But you, as children of truth, not with these transitory garments are you to clothe ourselves. Rather, I say to you that you will become blessed when you strip yourselves! For it is no great thing [...] outside.” (The Dialogue of the Savior), (21.07.2011).

23 Yeshua saw little children who are being suckled. He says to his disciples: These little children who are being suckled are like those who enter the Sovereignty. || They say to him: Shall we thus by becoming little children enter the Sovereignty? || Yeshua says to them: When you make the two one, and you make the inside as the outside and the outside as the inside and the above as the below, and if you establish the male with the female as a single unity so that the man will not act masculine and the woman not act feminine, when you establish eyes in the place of an eye and a hand in the place of a hand and a foot in the place of a foot (and) an image in the place of an image — then shall you enter [the Sovereignty]. (G. Thom 22), <http://www.metalog.org/files/thomas.html> (21.07.2011)

24 Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, 109.

hostility towards birth and salvation role of knowledge, all of which are extremely important in gnostic teaching.

## 2.5 Men's World

Finally, some researches have argued that medieval society treated woman as an inferior being in such extent that it encouraged her every attempt to become more similar to men. Bullough & Bullough's book "Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender" is very important in that sense. Authors state that medieval society had double standards for a phenomenon of cross-dressing. In its early stage, they argue, the Christian and Jewish tradition of condemnation of every kind of cross-dressing was dominant, while in the later periods these norms became modified. Bullough & Bullough therefore hold that female cross-dressing was not only tolerated, but also encouraged (at least indirectly), which would stay in line with Sainly legends. It represented an attempt to reach the higher (male) social position. On the other hand, male transvestism was socially problematic and repressed.<sup>25</sup>

At this stage, differentiation between "religiously acceptable" and "socially acceptable" can be made. We must always bear in mind that saintly legends are foremost religious texts, and within religious circles activities of that kind were never desirable. A famous biblical place that contains condemnation of it is in Deuteronomy 22,5: "A woman shall not wear man's clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God."<sup>26</sup> Authors even suggest that some Church fathers could also be taken as examples of tolerant attitude regarding to cross-dressing, what Salisbury strongly opposes. She quotes Ambrosius, Jerome and Tertullian as typical cases of ecclesiastical refusal.<sup>27</sup> Council of Gangra even identified such praxis as a reason for excommunication: "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." (Canon 13)<sup>28</sup> Mandate of emperor Valentinian II (A. D. 390) is not less severe: "Women who shall have shorn their hair contrary to divine and human laws at the prompting of a profession, of which they have been persuaded, should be debarred from the doors of a church."<sup>29</sup> Contrary to the the-

25 Bullough, Vern L. / Bonnie Bullough: *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1993, 45–55.

26 *New American Standard Bible with Codes* (1995), electronic version within software Bibleworks 7.

27 Salisbury, *Church Fathers*, 97–110.

28 *New Advent: Synod of Gangra*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3804.htm> (18.07.2011).

29 Robinson Coleman / Paul Norton: *Roman State & Christian Church. A Collection of Legal Documents to A. D. 535. Vol. 2*, London: S.P.C.K. 1966, 430.



ory of Bullough & Bullough, we can find similar prohibitions in many European countries. Medieval society had a strict dressing code and some cities legally sanctioned both male and female cross-dressing.<sup>30</sup> It implies that the cross-dressing was both religiously and socially undesirable. In late medieval period, Spain in particular had very strict state laws on cross-dressing, while in England it was a matter of social disapproval.<sup>31</sup>

As we could infer, to become a man was not a religious neither social ideal. Barbara Newman maintains that achievement of angelic state of asexuality was for a woman an equivalent “to become a man”.<sup>32</sup> However, this does not imply that they really wanted to become a man in order to gain a religious fulfillment. On the contrary, legends we can find in *Legenda Aurea* univocally emphasize that cross-dressed virgins excelled in holiness amidst their mail companions. Analyzing medieval romances, Peggy McCracken concludes that transvestism in medieval time does not represent a political act of gender restratification. Cross-dressed persons are always identified “as presented”, placed in the dominant matrix. Cross-dressing is utilized only as a mean to achieve some aim.<sup>33</sup>

Similar case of female Saints with facial hair (Wilgefortis/Uncumber/ Liberata) can serve as a comparative case. This saint prayed to God to disfigure her body in order to avoid marriage to pagan prince. God answered her prayers and gave her a beard.<sup>34</sup> Neither in the first, nor second case can “male ideal” serve as a sufficient explanation. Beard and male habit are only a mean to achieve a higher religious deed that is a matter of a personal decision. And that very fact gives to these legends an emancipatory potential.

### 3. *Try this at home!*

Jolles in his famous book on simple literal form analyzed legend/vita and its most important factor – imitability.<sup>35</sup> That is to say, medieval legend as a liter-

30 Burns, Jane E.: Clothing, in: Schaus, Margaret (Hg.): *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe. An Encyclopedia*, New York / London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2006, 147–148; Puff, Helmut: Cross-dressing, in: ebd., 182–183.

31 Heise, Ursula K.: Transvestism and the Stage Controversy in Spain and England, 1580–1680, in: *Theatre Journal* 44/3 (1992) 357–374.

32 Newman, Barbara: *From Virile Woman to Womanchrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1995, 4.

33 McCracken, Peggy: The Boy Who Was a Girl. Reading Gender in: the “Roman De Silence”, in: *The Romanic Review* 85/4 (1994) 517–536.

34 New Advent, Catholic Encyclopedia: Wilgefortis, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15622a.htm> (13.05.2011).

35 Jolles, Andre: *Jednostavni oblici*, Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska 2000.

ary form always gave an imitable model to its reader. Bearing this in mind, theories of gnostic or pagan traditions look even less plausible. The basic structure of medieval legend is always the same: overcoming the obstacles in order to achieve the sacred life. Generally speaking, all medieval legends have only one theme — absolute personal commitment to God! The different life circumstances of every Saint show that the same aim can be attained in various situations and contexts. In that sense, even a transvestism was something heroic that had to be done in order to reach a holiness of life. What makes them controversial and liberative is their potential to bring up an important notion that nothing, either civil law or religious authority, can separate a person from God's grace.

### *Conclusion*

As we can see, medieval text can still be a source of theological inspiration and challenge for questioning our religious standards. Many theories that we analyzed fail to acknowledge very basic elements of legend as a genre — its inspirational character and theological function. Legend is not merely a piece of narrative, but a specific piece of text written as a testimony of heroism and audacity. Female cross-dressing is a perfect example of that. These legends teach us to think “outside the box”, provoking us to find a solution even when all opportunities have been constrained with tradition, legislation and customs. Yet, it would be wrong to understand it as something historically distant and unreachable. The spectrum of hagiography was deliberately wide in order to confront every particular life-situation with the same model of apostolic call, a call to follow Jesus. As we could see, these Saints were prepared to cross even Biblical laws, or better to say — to reinterpret them in their own personal context. This opens new perspectives for contemporary discussion on importance of religious personalism and hierarchisation of religious commandments in our historical moment. Every moment can be a chance for heroism, in one appearance or another.