

THE INTERROGATION OF A MALE TRANSVESTITE PROSTITUTE IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON

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Although legal records provide much valuable information on the practice of “sodomy” in late medieval Italy, such evidence is remarkably scant for other parts of Europe (Rocke 11, 19; Ruggiero 109–145). The document presented here stands practically alone for medieval England as a description of same-sex intercourse and male transvestism.¹ It thus provides important information toward an assessment of how medieval English society viewed such behavior. Medieval ideas about what modern people call “sexuality” cannot be elucidated just by analyzing the writings of canonists and theologians,² but must also be sought from documents of practice.

The document (the first case on membrane 2 of Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, Corporation of London Records Office) describes the testimony of John Rykener, “calling himself Eleanor,” who was apprehended in women’s clothing having sex with another man in a London street one night in December 1394. Rykener described his initiation into transvestism and prostitution. He claimed that he had worked as a prostitute in London, having been initiated by women who taught him to cross-dress. He then worked in Oxford as an embroideress, having sex with several students, and in Burford as a tapster, again also practicing prostitution. His partners included priests, Franciscans, and Carmelites. He also reported having sex with many women, including nuns, but not apparently for money.

As an entry in the Plea and Memoranda Rolls, Rykener’s case has been obscured from modern scrutiny by omission from the detailed published calendar. The calendar, published by A. H. Thomas in the 1920s and 1930s, is in general so complete that only in rare cases would scholars err in relying on it to locate entries of interest. In the first two volumes, Thomas calendared every entry on the rolls, usually in such detail that nothing but formulaic verbiage was lost. By the third volume, he wrote: “The present volume, unlike its predecessors, is described as a calendar of *select* pleas and memoranda, because a somewhat larger number of formal entries and records of small debt actions have been omitted. Care has been taken, however, to include all passages which seem to add in any way to our knowledge of the times” (vii). In this volume, he continued to include a great deal of

detail in most of his calendar entries. For example, the case that follows Rykener's on the membrane, which concerns seditious language against the mayor, is allotted more than a full page.

Thomas's treatment of the examination of John Rykener, however, is different. For this entry, he wrote just a single sentence: "Examination of two men charged with immorality, of whom one implicated several persons, male and female, in religious orders" (228). The only other entries of such brevity are those summarizing writs or other formulaic or repetitive documents. Here, Thomas made invisible the nature of the "immorality" with which the men were charged; the mere declaration that "two men" were charged does not inform the reader that the immorality was homosexual, because they might have performed immoral acts with women who were not charged.³ Almost as interesting as what Thomas omitted is what he included: his reference to the involvement of religious orders places him in a long tradition of historians attentive to the charges of clerical decadence in the late Middle Ages. His inclusion of the information "male and female," although accurate, serves to further obscure the fact that by far the bulk of the testimony in this case concentrates on male-male sex.

Unfortunately, the result of the case does not survive, if indeed any formal action was taken. The Plea and Memoranda Rolls appear to have consisted partly of excerpts of pleadings in various courts (the original records of which do not survive), taken in order to be preserved as precedents. As Thomas discusses in Volume One, they also included a great deal of material dealing with offenses against public order or commercial morality, which city officials may have wished to record separately from personal actions (viii-x). They also contained a great deal of non-legal material that was noteworthy for a variety of reasons, including the city's relations with royal government. It is not entirely clear, then, why the examination of Rykener was entered on the roll, but nothing in the document indicates that any formal legal process was under way. What is clear—from the case's physical placement on the roll and the hand in which it is written—is that it is not a later interpolation.

It was rare indeed for a temporal court in England to deal with cases of sodomy, which is how Rykener's behavior would probably have been classified.⁴ Sexual matters were fully within the jurisdiction of the church courts. Although canon lawyers had a good deal to say about sodomy, in actual cases the charge of sodomy appears most often as a further accusation to hurl at heretics. Even so, it does not appear frequently in English church court records of the later Middle Ages: only one case, for example, turns up among the thousands of cases in the records from the London diocese for the late fifteenth century (Wunderli 83–84).⁵ As no church court records survive for that jurisdiction for the late fourteenth century, it is not possible to determine whether Rykener and his partner were prosecuted under ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

Despite the general rule that sexual offenses were matters for the church courts, in some cases the city of London took charge of these offenses. Prostitution and procuring, for example, involved public order; the temporal courts dealt with them for that reason, so that the same people might be prosecuted in both jurisdictions for the same offense. Even a few adultery and fornication cases ended up in the city courts, most of them involving priests.⁶ The city authorities seem to have been particularly eager to bring clerics' sexual transgressions to light, and this may be

why they recorded the examination of Rykener. Indeed, Rykener's awareness of their interest in rooting out clerical offenses may have prompted his concluding remark that he preferred priests to his other customers.

Rykener's interrogation not only provides valuable information about the practices of transvestites and female prostitutes; it also raises issues central to our understanding of the role of sexuality in medieval cultures, including the following: the construction, or lack thereof, of specific sexualities and whether such a sexuality was attributed to Rykener; the deployment of accusations of sodomy in confronting the masculinity of a celibate clergy; the relationship between grammatical and social passivity and objectification in sexual discourse; and the performative nature of the medieval understanding of gender and the issues of "passing" that arise from it. These questions are a heavy burden for John/Eleanor Rykener to bear alone, but the document is at least a starting point for considering them.

DOCUMENT

Corporation of London Records Office, Plea and Memoranda Roll A34, m. 2 (1395)

This case is found at the top of the membrane, and is followed by several unrelated cases in the same hand.⁷ We have expanded abbreviations and supplied minimal punctuation and capitalization.

Undecimo die Decembris anno regni regis Ricardi secundi decimo octavo, ducti fuerunt hic coram Johanne Fressh maiore et aldermannis civitatis Londoniensis Johannes Britby de comitate Eboracum et Johannes Rykener, se Elianoram nominans veste muliebri detectus. Qui die dominica ultimo preterita per quosdam dicte civitatis ministros noctanter inter horas octavam et nonam super quoddam stallum in venella vocata Sopereslane inventi fuerunt iacentes, illud vitium detestabile, nephandum, et ignominiosum committentes, pro sepeciali examinatione coram dictis maiore et aldermannis super premissa fienda et audienda etcetera. Qui quidem Johannes Britby inde allocutus fatebatur quod ipse per vicum regium de Chepe die dominica inter horas supradictas transiens, dictum Johannem Rykener vestitu⁸ muliebri ornatum, ipsumque mulierem fore suspicantem fuerat assecutus, petens ab eo, tanquam a muliere, si cum ea libidinose agere possit. Qui ab eo argentum pro labore suo petens sibi consentiebat, invicem transeuntes ad illud complendum usque stallum predictum. Ipsi tamen tunc ibidem per ministros predictos in eorum maleficiis detestabilibus capti fuerunt, carcere vero mancipati hucusque, etcetera. Et predictus Johannes Rykener in veste muliebri hic adductus de materia predicta allocutus cognovit se fecisse in omnibus prout idem Johannes Britby superius fatebatur etcetera. Quesitum fuit ulterius a prefato Johanne Rykener quis ei docuit dictum vitium exercere et quanto tempore, in quibus locis, et cum quibus personis masculis sive feminis illud actum libidinosum et nephandum commisit. Qui in animam suam sponte iuravit et cognovit quod quaedam Anna, meretrix quondam cuiusdam famuli domini Thome Blount, primo docuit ipsum vitium detestabile modo muliebri exercere. Item dixit quod quaedam Elizabeth Brouderer prius vestivit

ipsum veste muliebri; quae etiam conduxit quandam Aliciam filliam suam diversis hominibus luxuriae causa, ipsam cum eisdem hominibus in lectis eorum noctanter absque lumine reponens et eandem summo mane ab eisdem recedere fecit, monstrando eis dictum Johannem Rykener veste muliebri ornatum ipsum Alianoram nominantem, asserens ipsos cum ipsa sinistre egisse. Item dixit quod quidam Philippus, Rector de Theydon Gernon, concubuit cum eodem Johanne Rykener ut cum muliere in domo cuiusdam Elizabeth Brouderer extra Bisshoppesgate, quo tempore dictus Johannes Rykener asportavit duas togas ipsius Philippi. Et quando idem Philippus illas petiit a prefato Johanne Rykener, ipse dixit quod fuit uxor cuiusdam hominis, et si ipse illas repetere vellet faceret maritum suum versus ipsum prosequi. Item dictus Johannes Rykener fatebatur quod per quinque septimanas ante festum sancti Michaelis ultimo elapsam morabatur apud Oxonium et operatus est ibidem in veste muliebri in arte de brouderer nominans ipsum Alianoram. Et ibidem in marisco tres scolares ignotos,⁹ quorum unus nominatur dominus Willielmus Foxlee, alius dominus Johannes, et tertius dominus Walterus, usi fuerunt sepius cum ipso abominabile vitium supradictum. Item fatebatur prefatus Johannes Rykener quod ipse die veneris proximo ante festum sancti Michaelis supradictum venit apud Burford¹⁰ in comitate Oxonium.¹¹ Et ibidem fuit commorans cum quodam Johanne clerc atte Swan in officio de tapster per sex septimanas proximas sequentes, infra quod tempus duo fratres minores, quorum unus nominatur frater Michael et alius frater Johannes Barry, qui sibi dedit unum anulum aureum, et unus frater carmelitus et sex diversi homines extranei commiserunt cum illo vitium antedictum. Quorum quidem fratrum et hominum supradictorum quidam dabat dicto Johanni Rykener .xii. d, quidam .xx. d, quidam .ii. s. Item fatebatur idem Johannes Rykener quod fuit apud Bekenesfeld et ibidem idem ut vir concubuit cum quadam Johanna filia Johannis Mathew, et etiam ibidem cum ipso concubuerunt ut cum femina duo fratres minores alienigenae. Item fatebatur dictus Johannes Rykener quod post eius ultimum adventum Londoniae quidam dominus Johannes quondam capellanus ecclesiae sanctae Margaretae Patyns et alii duo capellani in venellis retro ecclesiam sanctae Katerinae iuxta turrim Londoniensem commiserunt cum illo illud vitium antedictum. Item dixit dictus Johannes Rykener quod ipse sepius concubuit cum quampluribus monialibus ut vir, et etiam concubuit modo virili cum quampluribus mulieribus, tam maritatis quam aliis, quarum numerum ignorat. Item fatebatur dictus Johannes Rykener quod quamplures presbiteri fecerunt illud vitium cum illo ut cum muliere, quorum numerum ignorat, et dixit quod citius cepit presbiteros quam alios quia plus vellent sibi dare quam alii.

TRANSLATION

On 11 December, 18 Richard II, were brought in the presence of John Fressh, Mayor, and the Aldermen of the City of London John Brithy of the county of York and John Rykener, calling [himself]¹² Eleanor, having been detected in women's clothing, who were found last Sunday night between the hours of 8 and 9 by certain officials of the city lying by a certain stall in Soper's Lane¹³ committing that detestable, unmentionable, and ignominious vice.¹⁴ In a separate examination held

before the Mayor and Aldermen about the occurrence, John Brithy confessed that he was passing through the high road of Cheap on Sunday between the above-mentioned hours and accosted John Rykener, dressed up as a woman, thinking he was a woman, asking him as he would a woman if he could commit a libidinous act with her. Requesting money for [his] labor, Rykener consented, and they went together to the aforesaid stall to complete the act, and were captured there during these detestable wrongdoings by the officials and taken to prison. And John Rykener, brought here in woman's clothing and questioned about this matter, acknowledged [himself] to have done everything just as John Brithy had confessed. Rykener was also asked who had taught him to exercise this vice, and for how long and in what places and with what persons, masculine or feminine, [he] had committed that libidinous and unspeakable act. [He] swore willingly on [his] soul that a certain Anna, the whore of a former servant of Sir Thomas Blount, first taught him to practice this detestable vice in the manner of a woman. [He] further said that a certain Elizabeth Brouderer first dressed him in women's clothing;¹⁵ she also brought her daughter Alice to diverse men for the sake of lust, placing her with those men in their beds at night without light, making her leave early in the morning and showing them the said John Rykener dressed up in women's clothing, calling him Eleanor and saying that they had misbehaved with her. [He] further said that certain Phillip, rector of Theydon Garnon,¹⁶ had sex with him as with a woman in Elizabeth Brouderer's house outside Bishopsgate, at which time Rykener took away two gowns of Phillip's, and when Phillip requested them from Rykener he said that [he] was the wife of a certain man and that if Phillip wished to ask for them back [he] would make [his] husband bring suit against him. Rykener further confessed that for five weeks before the feast of St. Michael's last [he] was staying at Oxford, and there, in women's clothing and calling himself Eleanor, worked as an embroideress; and there in the marsh three unsuspecting scholars—of whom one was named Sir William Foxlee,¹⁷ another Sir John, and the third Sir Walter—practiced the abominable vice with him often. John Rykener further confessed that on Friday before the feast of St. Michael [he] came to Burford in Oxfordshire and there dwelt with a certain John Clerk at the Swan in the capacity of tapster for the next six weeks,¹⁸ during which time two Franciscans, one named Brother Michael and the other Brother John, who gave [him] a gold ring, and one Carmelite friar and six foreign men committed the above-said vice with him, of whom one gave Rykener twelve pence, one twenty pence, and one two shillings. Rykener further confessed that [he] went to Beaconsfield¹⁹ and there, as a man, had sex with a certain Joan, daughter of John Matthew, and also there two foreign Franciscans had sex with him as a woman. John Rykener also confessed that after [his] last return to London a certain Sir John, once chaplain at the Church of St. Margaret Pattens,²⁰ and two other chaplains committed with him the aforementioned vice in the lanes behind St. Katherine's Church by the Tower of London. Rykener further said that he often had sex as a man with many nuns and also had sex as a man with many women both married and otherwise, how many [he] did not know. Rykener further confessed that many priests had committed that vice with him as with a woman, how many [he] did not know, and said that [he] accommodated priests more readily than other people because they wished to give [him] more than others.

NOTES

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1. Boswell provides the most thorough treatment of the general subject; see also Goodich. There is little information on transvestite practice in the Middle Ages. Bullough and Bullough, in their chapter on the medieval period (45–73), generally do not associate male transvestism with homosexuality: “Not only did male cross dressers lose status, but it was generally believed that a man would impersonate a woman either in an attempt to insinuate himself in the confidence of women for sexual purposes or as part of a witchcraft ceremony” (60). They also add instances of ritual transvestism but none of prostitution.
2. The most accessible studies discussing these writings are those by Brundage and by Payer.
3. Boswell (17–21) discusses the falsification of history due to such practices by editors and translators.
4. There is no record of any temporal legislation against sodomy until sixteenth century. As Boswell (292–93) and Goodich (77) report, the thirteenth-century legal compilations *Fleta* and *Britton* prescribed the death penalty for sodomy. These works, however, are textbooks and not legal codes. There is no record of such an enactment or ordinance in England and no evidence of its enforcement, although laws against sodomy were instituted in several Italian towns.
5. For another example, see York Minister Library, Ms M2(1)f (Dean and Chapter, Court of Audience Register of Comperta 1357–1420 with Chapter act material 1359–1485), fol. 32r.
6. See for example, Corporation of London Records Office, Letter-Book I, fols. 286r–290r. These date from the early fifteenth century.
7. For the cases that precede and follow, see Thomas 3: 228–30.
8. The word *vestitu*, in the same hand as the rest of the document, is written over an erasure here.
9. The word *ignotos* is also written in the same hand over an erasure. Ultraviolet light does not reveal the erased word(s).
10. The document is torn here.
11. There is a lacuna where name of county should be.
12. We have put in brackets the places where the Latin pronoun used for Rykener is of indeterminate gender, or where we supply a pronoun that the Latin omits. Where we use an unbracketed masculine or feminine pronoun to refer to Rykener, this is because the Latin so specifies. The feminine is only used twice to refer to Rykener, both in indirect speech, so it seems reasonable and consistent to translate the indeterminate pronouns as masculine. We have indicated, however, where we have thus clarified the text.
13. Soper’s Lane, in Cheap and Cordwainer wards, ran south from Cheapside. The name probably comes from *soparii*, shopkeepers, not soapmakers (Lobel 94).
14. Since this language is stronger than that used to refer to prostitution in the legal records, it probably refers to sodomy here. See Karras (Chapter 3) for the legal language employed in reference to prostitutes. On the unmentionability of sodomy, see Boyd.
15. This may not be a surname but a by-name for an embroideress. She may be the same woman as Elizabeth, wife of Henry Moryng, who was convicted in 1385 of bawdry for

taking on young women as apprentice embroideresses and then prostituting them. Elizabeth Moryng lived in Broad Street Ward, in the parish of All Hallows Next the Wall, and Elizabeth Brouderer ten years later lived nearby, outside Bishopsgate. Corporation of London Records Office, Letter-Book H, fol. 194; English translation in Riley 484.

16. In Essex, near Epping.
17. The title "Dominus" or "Sir" was commonly used for priests. No William Foxlee (or any other Foxlee at that date) is found in Emden.
18. Tapsters were often connected with prostitution, and indeed taverns were suspect places for this reason. See Goldberg 118.
19. Beaconsfield, in Berkshire.
20. St. Margaret Pattens, in Tower Ward, between Fanchurch Street and East Cheap.

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