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¹37 C.F.R. §201.14 2018

A HISTORY OF WOMEN I N T H E W E S T

II. Silences of the Middle Ages

Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Editor

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Affidavits and Confessions

Georges Duby

IN THE MEDIEVAL WEST, women talked. They talked a great deal. Men felt that they talked too much, and "chatter" was among the foremost of the faults of women denounced by preachers. Yet voluble as women were, very little of what they said has survived. Up to the end of the thirteenth century there is virtually total silence. True, some texts from earlier periods purport to be by women. But there are good reasons to attribute most of them to men. And the few women who did write tried to write as men did, perhaps even copying a tirade that some ancient author had placed in the mouth of one of his heroines.

To catch the sound of an authentic female voice, one not masculinized by the straitjacket of rhetoric or travestied by plagiarism, we must look to the scribbled notes of the scribes whose business it was to record testimony and confessions. These scribes almost always wrote in Latin, placing yet another screen between us and the actual voices of women. We must translate as we read and attempt to imagine the words actually spoken. Still, this is one of the few places where we can catch the unadorned sound of the female voice. But such evidence does not become available until quite late, until after powerful men began to surround themselves with scribes and after the courts, in their search for the truth, began to require written evidence and to examine the consciences of witnesses.

Of the various manuscript sources that preserve such statements, I have chosen one of the oldest and richest, a transcript compiled in 1326 on orders of Jacques Fournier, who later became Pope Benedict XII.¹

In that year Fournier left the episcopal see of Mirepoix to become bishop of Pamiers. For nine years he had rigorously discharged the duties of his office, ferreting out deviants—people accused of casting spells or subscribing to the Catharist heresy—wherever they might be found in his diocese. Catharism, which had flared up again only a short while before, had once more subsided. The Dominicans and Franciscans had all but eliminated it from the lowlands. But in the mountain villages and high pastures it still flourished. In 1320, while investigating a woman accused of being a witch, Fournier had accidentally stumbled on another woman, Beatrice, who not only appeared to be mixed up in witchcraft herself but who also had made some suspicious remarks about Christ's body. After being interrogated by the bishop, the frightened woman fled, but she was tracked down and captured. Her confession led to a thorough investigation of the village of Montaillou. Men and women—the latter in particularly large numbers—were called before the bishop. Intelligent, curious, and keenly attuned to the slightest sign of wickedness, Fournier pressed the witnesses with his questions and ordered the clerk to prepare a very complete record of the confessions he elicited. The transcript is quite long. Here I give only brief excerpts from the testimony of two women. To be sure, these women were not speaking freely, but what they were coerced to say reflected their most private thoughts. Both were widows. One, Grazida, was a peasant of around twenty-two. The other, a noblewoman and the wife of a knight, was much older: she was none other than Beatrice, the woman with whom the scandal had originated. Under her maiden name, Béatrice de Planissolles, she has since become famous: the Occitanian philosopher René Nelli made her the protagonist of an operatic libretto, and, in 1975, the historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie published an excellent, and widely read, ethnographic study of the village of Montaillou.

Let us begin with the testimony of Grazida, who was interrogated on August 19, 1320:

Around seven years ago the curé [Pierre Clergue, the priest of Montaillou] came to the home of my mother, who was away in the fields for the harvest, and asked me to allow him to have carnal knowledge of me. I agreed. At the time I was a virgin of, I think, fourteen or fifteen. He deflowered me in the barn, where there was a pile of straw.

He used no violence. From then until the following January he knew me often, always in my mother's house, and with her knowledge and consent. It usually happened during the day.

Then, in January, the curé officiated at my marriage to Pierre Lizier, my late husband, and during the remaining four years of my husband's life the priest, with my husband's consent, frequently had carnal knowledge of me. When my husband asked me if the priest had had relations with me, I answered yes, and my husband told me to stay away from other men, except for this priest. Nevertheless, the priest never had relations with me when my husband was home, only when he was away . . .

- If you had known that your mother was the curé's first cousin, in fact by bastardy, would you have consented to be known by him?
- No. But because it pleased me as well as the curé when we had carnal knowledge of each other, I did not think I was committing a sin with him.
- When this priest had knowledge of you, either before you had a husband or during your marriage, did you believe you were committing a sin?
- Because at that time it pleased me and the curé too to have mutual knowledge of each other, I did not think so, and it did not seem to me that it was a sin. But because now it does not please me to be known by this priest, if it were to happen I would think it was a sin.
- If such a union had been forbidden by your husband, would you have thought you were committing a sin if you had subsequently copulated with this priest?
- Assuming that my husband had forbidden me to do it, which he did not, I would not have thought I was committing a sin if, despite his prohibition, I had copulated with this priest, since it pleased both me and the priest . . .
- Do you believe that people who behave properly and lead a holy life will go to heaven after death and that sinners will go to hell, and do you believe that hell and heaven exist?
- I do not know. I have heard that there is a heaven, and I believe it. I have heard that there is a hell, but I neither believe it nor deny it. I believe that there is a heaven

because it is a good thing, according to what I have heard, but I neither believe in nor deny hell, because it is a bad thing.

- Do you believe that carnal union is not a sin when it pleases the man and the woman?
- I do not believe that it is a sin.
- How long have you held this belief?
- Since this priest first had knowledge of me.
- Who taught you this error?
- No one. Myself.
- Have you taught it to anyone?
- No, no one has questioned me about it.

Beatrice's interrogation lasted two weeks, from August 13 to August 25, 1320. She reluctantly owned up to her many love affairs. Jacques Fournier forced her to talk about her lovers because some of them had taught her a little more about the heresy than she had learned from her father. We learn that noble women were no better protected than peasants from men's assaults or their own desires. When she was still a young bride, perhaps fifteen years old and already pregnant, she was living in the château of Montailou, which at that time was in the safekeeping of her first husband. Raymond Roussel, the steward of the estate, begged her to go with him to Lombardy to join what he called the "good Christians," that is, the Catharist Perfecti:

This Raymond spoke to me of heretical things frequently and in many places and urged me to go off with him. Finally, one night, after we had dined together, he secretly entered my bedroom and hid under my bed. After straightening the house, I went to bed. The servants were resting or sleeping. I too fell asleep. Raymond came out from under the bed and, wearing a nightshirt, crept into bed with me, and began to act as though he wanted to sleep carnally with me. I said, "What is this?" He told me to keep quiet. I answered, "What do you mean, peasant, telling me to keep quiet?" I began to shout and called my maids, who were sleeping with me in the same room, telling them that there was a man in bed with me. Hearing that, Raymond left the bed and the room. The next day he told me that he had been wrong to hide in my room. I answered: "Now everything is clear. When you asked me to go with you to the good Christians, you were just saying that

so you could have me and have carnal knowledge of me. If I weren't afraid that my husband would think I had done something dishonorable with you, I would have you locked up in the tower immediately."

Beatrice's ferocity soon abated, however.

While my husband was still alive [she testified on August 10], one day Raymond Clergue, known as Pathau, the natural son of Guillaume Clergue, the brother of Pons Clergue who was the father of Pierre Clergue, now curé of Montailou, took me by force in the castle and had carnal knowledge of me. And when my husband Béranger de Roquefort died a year later, this Raymond claimed me publicly.

Although the aforementioned curé, Raymond's first cousin, knew that Raymond had relations with me, he asked me to allow him to have knowledge of me. I asked him how he could demand such a thing, knowing that his cousin was having carnal knowledge of me and would soon find out. The curé told me that there was nothing to worry or be embarrassed about. "I know how things stand, but I can be more useful to you and give you more than that bastard." He also told me that both of them, he, the curé, and Raymond, could claim me together. I told him that I would never allow such a thing as long as I lived, because there would be dissension between them because of me and each would vilify me on account of the other. From the time the priest first had carnal knowledge of me, I had no further carnal relations with Raymond, although from time to time he tried. Because of that there was, between Raymond and the priest, a concealed hatred, which I knew about.

Pierre Clergue had attacked her for the first time during Lent, when

I went to the church of Montailou to confess my sins. While I was there, I went to the curé, who was hearing confessions behind the altar of Saint Mary. When I knelt in front of him, he kissed me and said there was no woman in the world he loved as much as me. Dumbfounded, I left without confessing. Later, around the time of Easter, he came to see me several times and asked me to allow him to have carnal knowledge of me. Once, when he asked me this in my home, I told him

that I would rather be known by four men than by one priest, because I had heard that a woman who had been known carnally by a priest was not permitted to see the face of God. He answered that I was foolish and ignorant, because it was a great sin for a woman to be known by her husband or any other man and that the sin was the same no matter who the man was, husband or priest. According to him, it was even a greater sin with the husband because the wife believed she was not committing a sin with her husband but was committing one with other men.

One night in early July, Beatrice finally gave in at her home near the castle, where the priest subsequently called on her two or three times a week, not abstaining even during the most solemn holy occasions. The affair lasted for a year and a half, until Beatrice left Montaignou for Prades:

Pierre Clergue [she confessed on August 22] came to see me there. He told me that he would send Jean, his novice, whose family name I do not know, to fetch me and asked me to come sleep with him the following night. Which I agreed to do. Early that night I was at home waiting for the novice. He came, and because the night was dark I followed him to Saint Peter's Church in Prades, which we entered. There we found Pierre Clergue, who had had a bed set up in the church. I said, "How can we do such a thing in the church of Saint Peter?" He answered: "O que gran dampnage y ora seint Peire?" [dialect meaning perhaps: What great damnation can it cause Saint Peter?] We then got into bed and slept together in the church. That night, in that church, he had carnal knowledge of me. Before dawn he led me out of the church himself and accompanied me to the door of the house I was living in.

Shortly thereafter, on August 15, 1301, Beatrice married her second husband, a man from the lowlands. At the next harvest the curé of Montaignou, pretending to be from Limoux, came to see her.

He came into my house and told me that my sister Gentille, who lives in Limoux, sent her greetings, and I received him. We both went down to the cellar of the house, and there he had carnal knowledge of me, while Sibille, my servant, Arnaud Teisseire's daughter, stood at the cellar door. The night before

she had brought, on behalf of the curé, a *bliaud* from Barcelona with red and yellow silk lace. She had told me that he would be coming the next day, so that nobody else would come, and that if anyone did come they would never suspect that the curé and I were committing a sin. That is why this servant stood in the middle of the open cellar door while I was copulating with the priest.

Widowed for a second time some five years prior to her interrogation, Beatrice's affections now turned to Barthélemy, the priest of the parish in which she was then living and her youngest daughter's teacher. From June until Pentecost she enjoyed sexual relations with him, always during the daytime when she was home alone. Later they went together to the Catalonian side of the Pyrenees, in the county of Pailars. In that region priests lived openly with their concubines, to whom they bound themselves with contracts drawn up by a notary, as for a marriage. This arrangement lasted a year. When Beatrice, terrified by Jacques Fournier's preliminary interrogation, sought to escape the inquisition, she tried in her panic to rejoin this former lover.

Certain strange objects were found in the baggage she took with her. The inquisitors were in no doubt about what they were: witch's equipment. Beatrice explained:

The umbilical cords came from my daughters' male babies, and I kept them because a Jewess, now baptized, told me that if I carried them and found myself in court, I could not lose. That is why I took my grandchildren's cords and kept them. Since then I have not been in court and have not had an opportunity to test their effectiveness.

The bloodstained sheets are stained with the menstrual blood of my daughter Philippa. The baptized Jewess told me that if I kept the first blood that came out of my daughter and if I gave that menstrual blood to her husband or any other man to drink, that man would never care for another woman. So when my daughter Philippa, a long time ago now, had her first period, I looked her in the face. It was blue, and I asked her what was wrong. She told me that she had lost blood through the vulva. Recalling what the baptized Jew had told me, I cut off a piece of my daughter Philippa's nightshirt, which was stained with this blood, and as it seemed to me that there was not enough of it, I gave my daughter another

piece of very fine linen so that, when she got her period, she could dip this cloth in the blood and wet it. She did so. I dried these fabrics with the intention, after she married, of removing some of the menstrual blood from the cloth and giving it to her husband to drink. Philippa was engaged this year, and I planned to give such a drink to her betrothed. But I decided it would be better to wait until after he had had carnal knowledge of Philippa. She could give it to him herself. When I was arrested, the marriage had not yet been consummated, and there had been no wedding night, so I had not given the husband anything to drink.

When I put these pieces of cloth in my purse along with the grains of incense, I did not intend to use them in any curse. This is how it happened. The incense was not intended for any evil purpose. But this year my daughter had a headache. I was told that incense mixed with other things could cure this ailment. The grains of incense that were found on me in that bag were left over. I had no intention of doing anything else with them.

The mirror, the sheathed knife, and the piece of linen—I was not keeping them or carrying them with me to cast any spell or pronounce any curse.

The seed wrapped in muslin is the seed of the plant known as ground-ivy. This year a pilgrim gave me some and told me that it was good for falling sickness [epilepsy]. Since my grandson, the son of my daughter Condors, this year had a spell of falling sickness, I wanted to use this seed. But my daughter told me that she had taken her son to Saint Paul's Church, where he had been cured of the disease, and that she did not wish to treat her son for it in any way. So I did not use the seed.

- Have you cast any other evil spells? Have you taught them? Did you teach them to anyone?
- No. But sometimes I felt that the priest Barthélemy had cast a spell over me, because I loved him too passionately and always wanted to be with him, even though, after the first time I had carnal knowledge of him, my periods stopped. I asked him about it. He always denied it.

Both women abjured heresy, were absolved, and, on March 3, 1321, appeared before the inquisitor for heretical deviancy for the kingdom of France. On March 8, they were sentenced to “the

wall,” that is, life imprisonment. But on July 4, 1322, both had their sentences commuted. Set free, they were required as long as they lived to wear yellow crosses on their clothing, a sign to the public to beware and not to come too near these once-tainted bodies.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY ARTHUR GOLDHAMMER

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GEORGES DUBY

1. *Le registre d'inquisition de Jacques Fournier, évêque de Pamiers (1318-1325)*, 3 vols. (Toulouse, 1965), and *Le registre d'inquisition de Jacques Fournier* (Paris-The Hague-New York, 1978), 3 vols.