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# Breaking Boundaries: The Worth of Women in the Merovingian Period

Rachel R. McKinnon  
*Clackamas High School*

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Rachel McKinnon

Balzer

Western Civilization 1.4

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### Breaking Boundaries: The Worth of Women in the Merovingian Period

Women of the Merovingian period, a period that lasted from 457-751 CE, lived in a heavily patriarchal time. Men possessed all of the power and value in the society, causing women to be degraded and viewed as property of those men. The women were viewed with “two contradictory and confining... stereotypes: wom[a]n as a sexual object and woman as a dutiful wife and mother” (Wemple, “The Triple Heritage” 17). This means that they were required as support for their husbands or fathers- whether that be for fulfilling sexual needs or practicality- but they were never viewed as key figures in society. While these stereotypes were enforced on women in general, they were heavily emphasized in the aristocracy. Aristocratic women were more restricted in their rights; since these women were in the public eye and seen with the male nobility, they felt the brunt of society’s expectations of “womanly behavior.” Comparatively, women of the lower-class had many more rights than those of the upper-class. The lives of women in the lower-class were not as concerning to the majority of the population as are the lives of the upper-class, being that the lower-class were farmers or slaves, so “sex roles were less clearly defined, and women were regarded as helpmates rather than dependents” (Wemple, “Merovingian Women in Law” 70). However, the life and accomplishments of Queen Radegund, to become Saint Radegund, suggest that upper-class women in the Merovingian period highly valued their personal freedom and choice, and the opportunity to live their lives the way they chose. This is shown by her continual defiance of the expectations held to her, and persistently

seeking to better the society around her. Because they seldom received that freedom from society, women like Radegund rebelled against the social expectations of women in order to win it. In doing so, they prove the worth of women to the population during this time period.

Born in 525 CE to King Bertechar of Thuringia, Radegund was a princess. When Radegund was a young girl, her father was killed by her uncle Hermanfred, who was assisted by a Frankish royal named Theodoric, which allowed Hermanfred to take over the nation and Radegund. Theodoric, realizing the evil crime that Hermanfred has committed and knowing the nation would be weak after a power shift, convinces his brother Clothar and their forces to invade the Thuringian nation and take over the region: “Theodoric, remembering the wrongs done by Hermanfred... called his brother Clothar to his aid and prepared to march against [Hermanfred], promising that a share of the plunder should be given to King Clothar” (Gregory of Tours 7.4). This shows the fall of Thuringia, Radegund’s home. As a result of this, “[Radegund] became part of the plunder of these conquerors... falling to the lot of the illustrious King Clothar, she [was] taken to Athies in Vermandois, a royal villa, and her upbringing [was] entrusted to guardians” (McNamara 70). Radegund had now not only lost her father, but now her home as well, and Clothar had her sent away to be raised as his queen. This shows the objectification of women: Radegund is viewed merely as property and an investment opportunity for the king. However, at this villa Radegund perseveres and instead begins to pursue the ascetic lifestyle that she wishes for instead of being Clothar’s property. She tended to the other children who lived at the villa: she fed them, washed their hair and hands, and played with them. She spiritually influenced the children by having them build a cross and sing psalms to bring them closer to God and realize the importance of faith. This signals the beginning of her spiritual journey, the dedication to her personal freedom, and the impact she has on others. Even after

having everything taken away from her, Radegund demonstrates how women in the aristocracy at this time have greater aspirations for their lives than being the perfect woman that societal standards expect them to be, instead she shows what she is truly capable of.

However, eventually Clothar came to collect Radegund from the villa in order to make her his wife and queen. When Radegund heard of his intentions, she ran away. In doing this, she defies the king in order to maintain her self-reliance and the right to practice her ascetic lifestyle. She is not merely obedient to Clothar, rather she shows her willingness to fight for her freedom and prove her worth as a woman as being more than a sexual object. Radegund has her right to her freedom take away again when “he [finally] settle[s] with her that she should be made his queen at Soissons” (McNamara 72), and she is forced to marry him and live with him in the castle. Although she was forced to be his queen, she never bared him any children and constantly made excuses in order to do her duty to Christ: Fortunatus even writes that Radegund would ask to leave her marriage bed in order to “relieve nature” (McNamara 73). However, she would actually then lay on the floor of the bathroom covered in a hair shirt, a rough cloth designed to punish the wearer for sin, and pray to Christ. This is significant because she continually puts her values above her duty as queen and the king himself: disregarding the expectation that Radegund should be attentive to Clothar and his needs.

When Clothar eventually killed her brother, the sole surviving member of her family, Radegund was distraught and escaped the castle. She traveled to the church in Noyon and begged the Bishop Médard to consecrate her as a deaconess. Médard, afraid of the king’s men who threatened him against accepting Radegund, first refused her. In response, Radegund “entered the sacristy[,] put on a monastic garb and proceeded straight to the altar, saying to the blessed Médard: ‘If you shrink from consecrating me, and fear man more than God... He will require

His sheep's soul from your hand'" (McNamara 76). This shows Radegund's refusal to accept Clothar's control over her, she invokes God's name to ensure that Médard recognizes that God is the all-powerful ruler, not the earthly men who dominated society and try to unjustly rule over her. As a result of this, Médard immediately consecrated her as a deaconess. This allows her to fully explore her spiritual obligations and lifestyle: she becomes an official ascetic and is free from her obligations to Clothar. Radegund eventually uses this new, deserved freedom to found a monastery at Poitiers, where she is dedicated to caring for and teaching God's people. She took care of everyone regardless of status: lepers, prisoners, holy figures, the elderly, and the sick, anyone whom she encounters until the day of her death: August 13, 587 C.E. But perhaps Radegund's greatest physical accomplishment was her acquirement of the relic of the True Cross for her monastery: the cross Jesus was speculated to have been crucified on. Radegund exceeds the limitations of women, she does not allow herself to be property of anyone and instead fights for the right to her own life. She is not only living the lifestyle that she chooses: she is physically and spiritually bettering the lives of others through her work. She thereby shows that women are worth more than society gives them credit for, they are not only capable of and useful for the fulfillment of sexual needs and general background roles. She proves that because women fought against the limitations, and their work benefited others, they are more than just the property the men treat them as.

The patriarchal structure of society was the main cause of the severe standards toward women and their restricted ability to thrive in this time period. Raymond Van Dam states that because "Catholic Christianity was a 'man's world' ... [women] with differentiating characteristics had to be thought of as men in order to resolve the apparent contradiction between their gender and their prominence" (75-76). This shows that the thought that women were

incapable of success was so ingrained into society that a woman who wanted to help others and be self-determinate had to be thought of as a man for society to cope with her ambition. Men were considered superior to women to the extent that women couldn't be seen as feminine figures. The patriarchal society's severity was also shown when "the wife was the initiator and executor of a certain act of patronage, the entire enterprise [was] attributed... to both her and her husband" (Hen 228). This demonstrates how even when women were able to better the society, which was difficult due to the lack of support from their husbands and therefore lack of resources, they received only partial credit for their actions. This level of suppression was common throughout this time period. Radegund, however, was able to push past these barriers and succeed. Lynda Coon even depicts Radegund as not only pushing past the traditional system, but also upheaving the standards: "Radegund's continual defiance of masculine authority inverts the traditional gender hierarchy of male-female... her financial support of... monasticism places important holy men in the position of being the economic clients of a woman, while her... punishment of her body rivals that of any Frankish holy man" (129). This directly compares the potential of women with that of men and, through the example of Radegund, confirms that women were capable of the same acts that men were celebrated for; thus disproving that women were inferior.

Radegund defeats one of the main expectations of women acting as "sexual object[s]" (Wemple, "The Triple Heritage" 17). This belief is apparent in that the "ambition in a woman [at this time] was tolerated as long as she did not appear too independent and achieved her goals by using her sexual power" (Wemple, "Merovingian Women in Law" 194). By use of the word "tolerated" instead of "encouraged," and putting the emphasis on a woman's sexual power, this exemplifies society's belief that one of the ideal behaviors of women was to merely satisfy the

sexual needs of men. Radegund, however, proves that not all women are or have to be sexual objects in order to succeed. Throughout her life, Radegund desired to remain celibate, but was forced to marry Clothar. Because of the aforementioned behavior of Radegund leaving her marriage bed to do her duty to Christ, the populace joked that Clothar “had yoked himself to a monacha [nun] rather than a queen” (McNamara 73). Her refusal to be with Clothar shows her dedication to Christ instead of sexual relations or the expectations that go along with them. Such a comment, however, is in itself degrading and shows the extent of the high requirements that society held for women. Radegund’s authority is undermined and mitigated merely because she values being, and wants to remain, celibate. Therefore, the Merovingian society values a woman’s sexual status far more than her political capabilities when considering what makes her “queenly.” However, Radegund’s defiance of these expectations shows her as an example of an upper-class woman fighting for her freedom of choice and sexual self-determination. This supports the theory that aristocratic women valued and sought the right to express their choice so much so that they were willing to go against the majority of the population, even their king. They proved that they were capable of much more than currently allowed to them: they were not objects- but people too. Therefore, they deserve the same rights as men and should be treated as their equal.

Radegund also disproves the expectation of being a “dutiful wife and mother” (Wemple 17) by leaving her husband while she pursues her spiritual duties. At this time, upper-class women were expected to be nurturing toward their husbands and children- especially their sons- in order to ensure the continuation of a strong kingdom. Radegund did not follow this societal norm; she constantly sent Clothar away, had no children to raise, and did not attach herself physically to others. In fact, after Radegund ran away from Clothar because he killed her brother,

she received news of Clothar wanting her back in the castle to be his wife. This "provokes a deeper commitment to a life of her own and her second move to Poitiers where she founds her monastery" (Crawford 75). This shows her abandonment of Clothar instead of attending to him and bearing his children. Jason Glenn states "[Radegund] found the thought of lying with her husband distasteful" (60), further exemplifying her disinterest in tending to Clothar and being a good wife by society's standards. Instead, she uses her accessibility to "powerful mediators, [such as] Germanus, the Bishop of Paris [whose] intervention finally persuades King Clothar to leave Radegund in peace" (Crawford 76). This way, Radegund officially succeeds in pushing away Clothar, and instead turns her focus to her spiritual journey. Radegund successfully invalidates the belief that she should be a dutiful wife and mother, and instead follows her own belief about relationships with other people: that people should be spiritually attached to others. This means that their souls are connected through God. The woman she names as the abbess at Poitiers- or leader of the convent- Agnes, she considers as her spiritual daughter, and the bishop Venatius Fortunatus as her spiritual son. Radegund refuses to conform to the societal pressures, and instead puts her values first, suggesting that the upper-class women who live under these pressures, also value this self-reliance and are willing to go to great lengths in order to ensure it. By Radegund not being a "dutiful wife and mother" (17), and her avoiding her societal obligations to him by any means necessary: she demonstrates how women are worth more than the "wife and mother" role assigned to them. A role of which devalues them by solely encouraging to bear and raise children, but to otherwise remain an extrinsic person in society. Her story suggests that women wanted to be recognized as more than just child-bearers or their husband's property.



While some may argue that Radegund was only able to succeed because of her political power and status as queen, this was disproved by the fact that Radegund did not use her status as queen to her advantage. In fact, "there [was] a noteworthy tension between the fulfilment of her queenly duties and her desire to live a holy life" (Glenn 60). This shows that Radegund had no desire to fulfill her queenly duties, instead she wanted to follow Christ and develop her spiritual life. As a solution to this issue, "Radegund was compelled to appear at court banquets, but... she abstained from food and retreated to her oratory as soon as she could" (Carrasco 55). Radegund shows attention to her obligations as queen, but proves her priority is centered on her faith: meaning that she values her independence over her image in society. Instead of being concerned with her reputation, "the devout lady, queen by birth and marriage, mistress of the palace, served the poor as a handmaid" (McNamara 72). By this, she demonstrates that she does not need any political status in order to succeed. This is further proved when she gives the leadership of the convent, the title of "abbess" to her spiritual daughter, Agnes. By renouncing the title of abbess, she shows her disuse for a political standing in order for her success. Though having a political standing may have assisted her- for example, with the negotiations with Emperor Justinian for the relic of the True Cross- she did not have to rely on her status as queen. Instead, she begged him to give it to her merely so her people would have a proper piece to worship, using only Justinian's moral sense to argue her cause, she does not use her role in founding the monastery as means to get the relic. Radegund's ability to succeed without a strong political status disproves the thought that she could only be successful through using her political standing. By Radegund's persistence in proving this, she suggests that women of the upper-class yearned to break down their limiting barriers and participate in society just as the men did, that they should

be given more credit for the things that they could accomplish because they're smart instead of using coercion and intimidation with their political power.

Radegund defies both limiting stereotypes and is able to live the spiritual life of her choice and greatly impact the lives of others. By going against what was thought to be a woman's capability, she also proves the real worth of women: they are not objects for men to own; rather, they are living and thinking human beings that are capable of the same amount of work as men. Radegund saves the lives of the sick and wounded by "not shrinking from scurf scabs, lice or pus... [and] pluck[ing] off worms and scrubb[ing] away the putrid flesh [in order to get rid of disease]" (McNamara 77). Radegund does not recoil from the horrible conditions that these people are in, instead she shows her love and dedication to God's people by healing them, cleaning them and keeping them safe. In addition to physically caring for people, Radegund also spiritually influences them as well: "Radegund's story...can shape a renewed understanding of the significance of the spiritual journey in the pursuit of one's deepest dreams, ambitions, and desires" (Crawford 86). This shows the importance of Radegund's story. Her life and work, the main points of study, include "mystically baptiz[ing] the sick, anoint[ing] the dying, and occupy[ing] Christ's chair at Frankish re-creations of the last supper... [she] transforms Gaul into a Christian province and dispenses the 'medicine of salvation' among the Franks" (Coon 129). This proves Radegund's contribution to society, and her proof of the worth of women being much more than societal expectations allow for. Using Radegund as an exemplar for her sex, we can assume that upper-class women fought for their freedom and right to self-determination, in spite of the extremely limiting way of life that their society believed was correct. Although this can be reasonably assumed, little is actually known about the full rights of upper-class woman, and how many who- like Radegund- took action to improve their situation.

However, with further research on the reaction of aristocratic women to the society around them, we can piece together a bit of the puzzle that remains of the Merovingian period.

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