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Sir Anne and his daughter Anne – unisex names in the Middle Ages

If one talks about the sex and gender of people who lived hundreds of years ago (and that's what I do in this blog), one has to make many assumptions. For once, let us not think about (inter)sex but only about social roles – how do you know which gender a person belonged to? Often enough, the most important (or inded the only) evidence for someone's gender we have after a few centuries is a name, and in this blogpost I would like to look at names and gender (partly drawing on research I did in a very different context: Rolker 2014).

If we talk about gender in the Middle Ages, knowing a person's given name is better than nothing. After all, next to bodily attributes, names and clothes are almost universal gender attributes – people do not normally display their genitals in public to establish their gender, but they do expect people to be able to read clothes and names in a gendered way. And while information on bodily attributes (hair, voice, etc.) and clothes is indirect and often simply lacking for the vast majority of people who lived in the past, we often have a name, and normally trust the sources to preserve it more or less faithfully. And once we know some medieval person was called „John" or „Anne", we know their gender – after all, people did not call their sons „Anne", did they?

Portrait of Anne de Montmorency by Jean Clouet (original at the Musée Condé, Chantilly). Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=965758. Public domain.

Except they did. Anne de Montmorency (1493-1567), son of Guillaume de Montmorency and his wife Anne, was called so after his godmother Anne de Bretagne; he later called one of his daughters Anne, too. So four times *Anne* – for three women and one man. I have chosen Anne de Montmorency as an example here, as there is an abundance of sources (including several

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artistic representations) on his life, his political and his military career that leave no doubt that Anne was as male as you could be in sixteenth century France – a courtier, husband, father, war hero, duke, whatnot (Bedos-Rezak 1990; Rentet 2011). Just that he was called *Anne*, like his mother, his godmother, his daugher and very many other women.

While unisex names are a relatively prominent topic in contemporary debates on children's names, I found very little scholarly literature on names given to both boys and girls in the Middle Ages. There is an excellent study on naming practices in the Limousin from the Middle Ages to modern times, which quite in passing notes that the name *Anne* could designate men, and that the male name *Annet* was derived from the female name *Anne* (Pérouas *et al*. 1984, 72-73). Already the latter is unusual (only the opposite is common, think *Jean*/*Jeanne*), but the former makes you really wonder: if names like *Anne* were used by men, how do we know the gender of medieval people of which we know little but the name?

To ease my paranoia, I thought about systematic search strategies to find out about names and gender. Studies on names often rely on tax rolls, and fortunately some of them register gender independently from names. One of these tax roles is the famous Florentine Catasto of 1427 on which there are superb studies (Herlihy/Klapisch-Zuber 1978, 1985) and which has the additional advantage of being easily accessible online (http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/catasto/main.php).

I started with a few augurative names which I suspected to be unisex, based on what I had read (Herlihy 1988). A few SQL searches (http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/catasto/newsearch/sqlform.php) yielded the following results: The examples Herlihy quotes as unisex names (Herlihy 1988, 566: *Bonaventura* and *Beldi*) cannot be shown to be unisex in the Catasto, and many other augurative names invariably designate men in this source: *Bencivenni, Bonacorso, Bonaguida, Bonaiuto, Bonaventura, Dietaiuti, Salimbene, Salvi* and *Ventura* are all male names. However, other similar names are indeed found being used by women and men alike. In the 1427 Catasto, there are two men and one woman called *Bene,* three men and one woman called *Grazia,* five men and three women called *Migliore,* seven men and one women *Gentile,* nine men and two women called *Pace,* six men and women each called *Felice.*

The latter name in theory could be a saint's name but alsmost certainly is not. However, speaking about saints, I was struck to find both male and female taxpayers called *Andrea.*

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Normally, *Andrea* is quoted as a classic example of a name which is not really unisex (but thought to be, as people confuse the Italian male name *Andrea* with the German, English or Spanish female name *Andrea*). However, Florentine parents were probably not confused but knew perfectly well what they were doing. Just as they gave feminized names of male saints to girls *(Giovanna, Antonia)*, they sometimes bestowed an unaltered male saint's name to a girl (*Andrea*). And sometimes, they gave a masculine version of a female saint's name to a boy, as in the case of a certain *Caterino*.

All these names are rare, but I have little doubt that in several medieval societies, there were names given to both girls and boys. Some were orginally male names (as *Andrea*), but with augurative names one cannot be certain which form emerged first. If we take frequency as our guide (assuming that the original for would be more common than the derivative one), then names like *Felice* appear to have been originally female. After all, the Catasto contains (roughly) ten times more male axpayers than female ones, so if there are six women and six men called *Felice* this indicates a higher frequency of this name among women. Again, the numbers a re too small to make a strong case, but it may very well be that this means that there not only were unisex names, but that both male and female names could develop into unisex names.

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