Slandered and Expelled: Female Monastic Exile in Carolingian Europe, c. 814 CE

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ABSTRACT: This essay reexamines ninth-century sources about Carolingian emperors, particularly the so-called Astronomer's biography of Louis the Pious (r. 814–40 CE), to demonstrate that Emperor Louis employed popular tropes of female sexual immorality to remove his sisters from court on account of their political power. Although Louis used political language to describe the monastic exiling of male relatives, he chose sexualized and gendered language for female relatives who presented similar dangers. We argue that this discrepancy in language reveals an early-ninth-century discourse that lacked either the language for understanding, or the willingness to acknowledge, female political power—as well as a reluctance in modern historiography to recognize the political potential of women beyond their reproductive capabilities.

The Astronomer offered one of the primary attestations to the 814 "cleansing of the palace." Writing shortly after the emperor's 840 death, he described Louis's preparations for his move to Aachen. He explained how Louis, although "most mild by nature," had "long since made up his mind about the behavior of his sisters in his father's household, by which stain alone his father's house was blemished" (2009, p. 247). The Astronomer then narrated how the emperor first had some of his men go on ahead and "restrain carefully, until Louis's arrival, a few [women] who were particularly debauched or whose scornful arrogance was treasonous" (p. 247). Then, once he arrived at the palace, Louis "ordered the whole crowd of women—it was extremely large—to be excluded from the palace, except for a very few whom he deemed suitable for royal service" (p. 248).

The Astronomer never named the members of this "whole crowd of women," but they certainly included Louis's sisters, half-sisters, nieces, and even other relatives such as Gundrada, his father's cousin. The Astronomer instead painted the nameless lot of women as immoral—and his protagonist, Louis, as the obedient son: the sisters "withdrew to the properties they had received from their father" since "they got what they deserved from the emperor" (2009, p. 248). He never mentioned that the sisters, not specifically deeded any lands by their late father, were compelled to join convents. Nor did the Astronomer specify the exact nature of their problematic behavior. The emphasis on women and use of the term "debauched" (*stuprum*), however, points to gendered—namely, sexual—sins.

The princesses' promiscuity is further suggested in Einhard's biography of Louis's father. In his *The Life of Charles the Great*, Einhard wrote, "although [Charlemagne's] daughters were most beautiful and were deeply loved by him, strange to say he never wanted to give any one of them in marriage to anybody, whether a Frank or a foreigner, but kept them all with him until his death, saying that he could not give up their companionship" (2008, p. 33). Then Einhard hinted at the

women's supposed improprieties, explaining, "because of this, though in other respects happy [Charlemagne] suffered the harshness of malign fortune. But he concealed this so well that there was no suspicion of anything shameful about them" (p. 33).

Einhard was purposefully coy. He had been a close advisor to Charlemagne and then one of the few courtiers to survive the 814 transition in power. In the 820s, as he wrote his *Vita*, he did so at the court of Louis the Pious. In composing this biography, Einhard had to please the son, now his lord, while not betraying the father, once his beloved lord. These carefully crafted passages hint at the reason for the siblings' expulsion (and thus echo the then-dominant story that Louis's court had woven about the princesses' indiscretions) without directly maligning Charlemagne's daughters. Moreover, as Anne Latowsky (2013) has written, "Einhard offers ample celebration of his subject, while protecting the king's memory from critics who might scoff at unrestrained praise" (p. 38). Similarly, de Jong (2009) has seen Einhard's words as rhetorically informed: "Real praise was all the more effective if perfection was mitigated by one flaw, and not a very serious flaw, for that matter. Indulging one's daughters and overlooking their peccadilloes could count as such" (pp. 191–2). Still, de Jong has acknowledged, "Einhard wrote his *Vita Karoli* in Louis's court, and his oblique remark about the daughters creating scandal may well have been a public acknowledgment that *mores* at the court had changed since the old emperor's death" (p. 192).

Whatever Einhard's motivation, his words were soon elaborated. When he wrote that Charlemagne could not do without his daughters' company, he used the phrase *contuberium earum* in a neutral manner. Two decades later, the Astronomer situated the sisters' shameful conduct…in *contubernio paterno*, that is, in their father's company and in his household; this had caused a moral contamination of the 'paternal house' … that affected the entire palace community. The Astronomer deftly contrasted the royal quarters with the palace, at large, suggesting that this female depravity spread outwards from the centre like a stain that affected the entire royal household (de Jong, 2009, p. 190). But if these women were depraved and thus jeopardized the palace and realm, what was the nature of their immorality?

Einhard claimed that Charlemagne never allowed his daughters to marry; one might thus infer that any relations the women had with men were, accordingly, illicit. Or one might wonder, as did Nelson (1996), whether Charlemagne gave "his permission [that] they might have lovers" (p. 241). Neither need be true. During Charlemagne's reign, official, Church-sanctioned marriages were not the norm. People regularly entered into long-term partnerships lacking marriage rituals, and these unions were widely recognized as legitimate. That is precisely what Charlemagne's two eldest daughters did: Rotrude (774–810) with Count Rorigo and Bertha with Angilbert of St. Riquier (c. 740s–814). Only in Charlemagne's later years and then, more so, at Louis the Pious's court did the Frankish world start to draw clearer distinctions between such partnerships and "official," Christian marriages. For Charlemagne's daughters, who initiated their relationships at the end of the eighth century, such lines had not yet been drawn.

Nor would the princesses' relations have been secretive or unknown to Charlemagne, as some English translations of the original Latin (and later medieval tales) imply (Tourney, 2003). Rotrude's and Bertha's partners were key men in the realm, and the sons born from these unions (one to

Rotrude, two to Bertha) lived at court. Rather than Charlemagne's daughters engaging in furtive, illicit relationships behind their father's back, this emperor, well-known for his vigilance (as Einhard himself tells us), certainly knew and approved of these relationships.

Moreover, as Nelson (1996) and Anton Scharer (2009) have convincingly argued, the father likely encouraged his daughters *not* to enter into formal marriages in order to ensure their political help at court (namely, with containing rivalries among their brothers), to prevent rival claimants to the throne, and to guarantee smooth transitions in power. Charlemagne had himself experienced the troubles born out of unwelcome unions, as when Hiltrude, the half-sister of Charlemagne's father, Pepin the Short (r. 751–68), married Bavarian duke Odilo against her own brothers' advice—ultimately spawning a rival line that included Charlemagne's challenger Duke Tassilo (Anonymous, 1972, pp. 59, 64–67; Einhard, 2008, p. 26).

The Astronomer points to this very concern when narrating the reason for Louis's expulsion of his sisters: the emperor "wanted to remedy the offense [of the women's debauchery] but also to prevent a new scandal arising like the one that once happened on account of Odilo and Hiltrude" (2009, p. 247). In offering this second reason, however, the biographer undermined his first, since rival claimants to the throne could only spring from stable and licit relationships like that between Bertha and Angilbert, not from the immoral promiscuity in which, he implied, they engaged. Although de Jong (2009) has interpreted "the Astronomer's innuendo [as] clearly directed against the dominant role of women in the palace, and on the fact that their choice of partners had been beyond male control" (p. 190), textual depictions of Charlemagne present a man with significant control and influence over his household. It is difficult to imagine his second-eldest daughter, Bertha, and one of his closest and most beloved advisors becoming intimate against this powerful man's wishes. Moreover, following Bertha and Angilbert's initial coupling, Charlemagne rewarded Angilbert with multiple prestigious duties—hardly the reaction of a king upset with that man's actions (Rabe, 1995).

If the women's lack of discipline could "damage royal authority and the ruler's reputation" (de Jong, 2009, p. 190), one must find proof of the princesses' disorder or debauchery. The only possible evidence from Charlemagne's reign comes in one letter written by court scholar and royal advisor Alcuin of York (735–804). In an 801/2 CE letter to his pupil Fredegisus, Alcuin writes of "crowned doves" flitting at palace windows, most likely a reference to the king's daughters and female relatives (1895, p. 392). He does not, however, explicitly warn the young man of the doves' moral laxity or sexual promiscuity. Indeed, another letter to Fredegisus asks the pupil, based at court, to send Alcuin's greetings to Charlemagne's sister and eldest daughter and encourages him to teach the women (1895, p. 420). Moreover, other letters by Alcuin—often ones written to the women themselves—demonstrate his close relationships with, and praise of, them. Charlemagne's second eldest daughter, Bertha, was particularly close to Alcuin, and she received a nickname and many poems in her honor from him (Garrison, 2005). Considering the weight of the textual evidence, it is most likely that Alcuin was encouraging a young cleric not to become too involved in worldly matters or engage too often with laywomen.

A few texts may suggest moral laxity on Charlemagne's part. Scholars sometimes interpret the Astronomer's biography as juxtaposing Charlemagne's morally questionable reign with Louis's

morally sound one, but de Jong (2009) has convincingly argued that historians have exaggerated this contrast (p. 190). She also has found it unlikely that Charlemagne's many concubines would have been the cause of so much criticism (p. 191).

So too should we acknowledge how later readers of Einhard's text have interpreted Charlemagne's closeness to his daughters and his desire to never be without them as suggesting incest. Among early medieval royal families, there was an "utter taboo of incest even among distant kinsmen, let alone close ones" (de Jong, 2009, p. 190), and Janet L. Nelson (1996) has examined and soundly dismissed suggestions of incest based on Einhard's text or Charlemagne's original sarcophagus—a marble structure that depicted the Rape of Proserpina (pp. 223–5, 240–1).

The most damning text is a dream by Walahfrid Strabo, written during Louis the Pious's reign that describes Charlemagne's genitalia being attacked in hell due to his sexual depravity. Paul Edward Dutton (1994), among others, has used this text to demonstrate a surge in criticism of Charlemagne during his son's reign, but de Jong (2009) has argued that such dreams were simply meant to remind Franks that even the smallest of sins could affect the afterlife of someone so great and pious as Charlemagne (pp. 136–41). Whether one follows Dutton's or de Jong's arguments, promiscuity on the late emperor's part need not involve or reflect upon his daughters.

In the end, no textual evidence supports the Astronomer's claims that Louis the Pious's sisters were disordered or debauched. If, however, the princesses had not "blemished" their father's house with their immorality, then why would the new emperor remove female family members who themselves could not, on account of their gender, make claims on the throne? Was the issue indeed, as de Jong (2009) has read from the Astronomer's biography, that these women might "yield dangerous political opponents of the kind of Tassilo, that is, men of royal blood who might pose a challenge to the throne" (p. 190)? While this is, of course, possible, we shall argue that Louis's primary concern was not the heirs of his sisters, but rather the sisters themselves and the significant political and social capital they possessed.

The Forgotten Son

Understanding Louis's need to cleanse the palace and malign his sisters requires examining his history with his father and his brothers. Louis (b. 778 CE) was the fourth-born son of Charlemagne and was never intended to rule the whole realm. Charlemagne's first son, Pepin the Hunchback (b. c. 768), would, by the 790s, be officially removed from the line of succession after leading a rebellion against his father. Charlemagne's second son and namesake, Charles the Younger (b. 772), became the obvious heir, remaining at court with his father. The third son, Pippin (b. 777), named King of Italy, would become one of his father's favorite children and provide much-cherished grandchildren to Charlemagne.

Louis meanwhile was given the new kingdom of Aquitaine, and as the Astronomer related, Charlemagne sent Louis, at age four, to southern France to rule (with the aid of adult advisors). Although scholars have described Charlemagne as "closely monitoring his youngest son's early education as king in Aquitaine" (de Jong, 2009, p. 15), such an interpretation proves too generous.

The Astronomer instead told of a father mocking his son for acquiring Basque customs and dress and worrying about the boy learning proper Frankish customs (2009, pp. 231–3).

The tensions between father and son are quite apparent—if not fully recognized by scholars—in Louis's biographies. According to the Astronomer (2009), Charlemagne repeatedly ordered his son Louis around: demanding his presence, only to change his mind; refusing to join the son when requested; dismissing his son; not allowing him to go on campaign; and even uninviting him to the imperial coronation. Again, de Jong (2009) has offered a positive reading of these episodes: "Both Thegan and the Astronomer depicted Louis as an exemplary and therefore obedient son.... In this way paternal dominance was emphasised, but so also was Louis's suitability for kingship." The proper relationship was, after all, one of "paternal dominance and filial submission." She has also highlighted how Charlemagne's refusal of his son's invitation to inspect Aquitaine was done "without publicly offending his son" and that Charlemagne later received Louis "with great joy" (p. 15). While we agree that the Astronomer portrayed Louis as the dutiful son, the biographer simultaneously painted him as neglected, even forgotten, by an uncaring father.

Louis was also regularly absent from key events, where other royal children were present. When Charlemagne rescinded his original invitation to Louis to join him in Rome in December 800 (where he was to be crowned emperor), Louis's brothers, Charles the Younger and Pippin, his many sisters, and possibly some nieces, nephews, and other relatives were present for the historic occasion. Louis's absence from this significant moment is echoed in texts memorializing the event. The *Paderborn Epic*, a poem composed in 801 to celebrate the coronation, describes an elaborate royal hunt in which the king, queen, princesses, and princes Charles the Younger and Pippin were all present—but at which Louis is absent and receives not even a hint of recognition as a family member. Scholars studying the Carolingian period, however, have not yet given sufficient attention to the fact that this poem memorializes every member of the Carolingian family except Louis—and what that might mean. Instead, the son's absence at important royal rituals and from literary encomium is connected to his being at the other end of the empire in Aquitaine.

Heir Apparent (?)

It is also the case that for the first thirty-some years of Louis's life, no one ever expected him to extend his rule beyond his Aquitainian borders. Then circumstances changed suddenly and dramatically. In July 810, when Charlemagne was in his sixties, his thirty-two-year-old son Pippin, King of Italy, passed away. Not long after, so too did Pepin the Hunchback, Charlemagne's exiled son. Then, in December 811, the emperor's eldest son, Charles the Younger, died. As the year turned to 812, only one legitimate son remained: Louis the Pious. The King of Aquitaine was now the obvious choice to become Charlemagne's imperial heir and co-emperor.

Yet, Charlemagne hesitated. Historians have wondered what other options he might have considered while biding his time. One possibility was his cousin and close advisor, Wala. There was also the emperor's grandson, Bernard of Italy, son of the late Pippin. Charlemagne had given much support to this grandson and the other children of his beloved, but now deceased, Pippin—Einhard

even wrote that Charlemagne brought Pippin's five daughters into his court after their father's (his son's) death and raised them as his own daughters (2008, p. 32).

It took considerable convincing—and nearly two years—but finally, in September 813, Emperor Charlemagne made his only living legitimate son co-emperor. The opposition to this heir can be inferred from the excessively positive textual depictions from Louis's reign. A poem by Ermold the Black in praise of Louis emphasizes how Charlemagne's favorite advisor, Einhard, had called for Louis's coronation (2009, p. 143). Biographer Thegan represented Louis as the youngest and thus overlooked son, but then demonstrated how this revealed him to be the most worthy of Charlemagne's progeny. He further described how the Franks willingly consented to Louis's coronation (2009, pp. 196–7).

Worthy or not, Louis the Pious was a palace outsider—a man firmly situated beyond the networks of power based at the Aachen court. He had spent nearly his entire life in southern France, building his own power base, forging ties with noblemen there, and perhaps even adopting some "foreign" customs. Louis did not know well, if at all, the situation at Aachen or the members of Charlemagne's court. Nor did his father's men know him. The death of Charlemagne thus created anxiety both for Louis in Aquitaine and for the court in Aachen.

It is no wonder, then, that, although "the hope of ruling everything welled up in Louis" upon his brothers' deaths, he initially delayed before making his way to Aachen lest he "give his father cause for suspicion" (Astronomer, 2009, pp. 244–5). And then, despite his imperial coronation by his own father, even his move toward Aachen after Charlemagne's death was "slow and hesitant, with messengers rushing to and fro in order to test the waters" (de Jong, 2009, p. 20). Louis, after all, was entering a turbulent sea.

Crowned Doves

While Louis the Pious was an outsider at his father's court, his sisters and half-sisters, as well as his nieces and some female cousins, had been firmly ensconced in Charlemagne's court for decades. In a seminal article, Janet L. Nelson (1996) demonstrated the very real, if somewhat intangible power, held by the women closest to Charlemagne. Mothers and wives of kings were, as one would expect, quite influential at court. Charlemagne's widowed mother, Bertrada, was heavily involved in her sons' power struggles and in Charlemagne's choice of wives. His wife Hildegard, through her success as a queen and especially producer of heirs, helped secure the political rise of her own brother. Charlemagne's next wife, Fastrada, despite producing no sons, became the most influential queen. When, for example, the king was on campaign in 791–2, he placed her in charge of organizing fasts and liturgies; when he was away in 793, Fastrada presided over a judicial case, possibly declaring the sentence herself. And finally, Charlemagne's last queen, Liutgard, corresponded with key courtiers about her husband's whereabouts and helped distribute the spoils of war to clergymen (pp. 232–6).

At Charlemagne's court, however, other female relatives played prominent roles—especially after his wife Liutgard died in June 800 and he chose not to remarry for the last fourteen years of his reign. To start, the king's daughters boasted greater longevity at court than any of Charlemagne's wives (or,

for that matter, his concubines, whose status would have prevented them from possessing serious political clout). For example, the king's longest marriage, to Hildegard, lasted twelve years (during most of which she was pregnant), while his second daughter, Bertha, had been at court for nearly thirty-five years at the time of Charlemagne's death. That proximity and constancy created deep intimacy and trust between father and daughter.

Bertha and her sisters' relationships with their father, the king, did not go unnoticed—and the realm's most important men worked to forge their own close relationships with the women. The courtiers relied upon them as intermediaries, requesting the women to pass along messages to the king. Alcuin, the heart of Charlemagne's cultural and intellectual renaissance, exchanged letters and texts with the king's female relatives, whom he affectionately referred to as his 'daughters'. When sick or otherwise unable to submit to the king's summons, a courtier would send his excuses and requests for forgiveness not to Charlemagne, but to his female relatives—as Alcuin asked of Gundrada (1895, p. 387). As these letters and other narrative sources suggest, the daughters also helped control access to their father. Thus, Nelson (1996) has surmised, after Liutgard's death in 800 and in the absence of an official queen, Charlemagne's daughters and other female relatives took over the queenly duties and became a "collective queen" (p. 239).

The women's significant political, cultural, and social capital is most apparent in the same sources that often demonstrate Louis the Pious's *lack* of capital: court poetry. Frankish poets crafted verse encomiums to glorify the royal family and win favor, heaping praise upon Charlemagne's daughters, as well as his sister and cousin. Theodulf's (c. 750–821) poem, *On the Court* (1985), situates the daughters as participating in the court's central rituals: processions, feasts, and hunts. In another poem, Theodulf (1881) emphasized the women's proximity and presence, describing how they encircle their enthroned father and then steadfastly remain by his side after the courtiers leave. These letters and poems, acknowledging the women's influence and lavishly praising them, demonstrate the court's recognition that Charlemagne's daughters held positions at the very center of the Carolingian realm. Thus, the great men of the court sought, as Nelson (1996) has written, the daughters' "*amicitia and familiaritas*, that is, political friendship," and it is in those poems that one can truly glimpse "the real power of these *puellae* [daughters]" (p. 239).

The same cannot, however, be said of attention to Louis in Aachen courtly poetry (or in Aachen palace life more generally). For example, Angilbert's (1985) poem to Charlemagne and his entourage praises Charles the Younger, Charlemagne's sister, and daughters Rotrude and Bertha; it even references Pippin who is away from court. Louis the Pious, however, never appears. While Theodulf's *On the Court* depicts both Charles and Louis as obedient sons, his other poems (as noted above) emphasize the princesses and ignore Louis. The *Paderborn Epic* glowingly describes Charlemagne, Queen Liutgard, princes Charles and Pippin, and the king's six daughters riding into the royal hunt—but never once mentions Louis the Pious. Perhaps most significantly, the *Paderborn Epic* poet describes Charlemagne's second eldest daughter, Bertha, and not her brothers, as resembling Charlemagne in character and physique (Anonymous, 1881, p. 371). Fabrice Guizard is right to note that the power of Bertha at Charlemagne's court, so apparent in the *Paderborn Epic*, could be seen as an encroachment on the structures of authority (2012, p. 249).

In fact, we would argue that that is precisely what Louis thought when he ascended the throne. An outsider to Aachen, he was fully aware of, and threatened by, his sisters' and other female relatives' insider status. They were connected to, and seemingly beloved by, all the key members at court. Women like Bertha may even have supported her nephew Bernard of Italy or her father's cousin Wala over her own brother Louis for the throne (Nelson, 1996, p. 239). If Louis the Pious was going to establish his power in the northern part of the realm, specifically at Aachen, then he needed to gain control of the palace and its inhabitants—especially his own sisters.

Monastic Exile

The Astronomer revealed potential threats to Louis's ascension. He wrote of the late emperor's cousin, "For Wala, who held the highest place with Emperor Charles, was especially feared in case he might be organizing something sinister against the new emperor." Thankfully, however, "Wala came to [Louis] very quickly and with humble submission yielded to Louis's will, commending himself according to the custom of the Franks." The emperor then capitalized on his relative's need to prove his claims of loyalty: Louis sent Wala to Aachen to "retrain [...] carefully, until Louis's arrival, a few [women] who were particularly debauched or whose scornful arrogance was treasonous" (2009, pp. 246–7). That is, the new regime employed a member of the old regime to detain fellow old-regime members. As de Jong (2009) has rhetorically asked, "What better way to emphasise Wala's total submission to the new ruler than to make him the instrument of the old guard's undoing?" (p. 191).

But the new emperor was not done. After Wala enforced the first wave of palace cleansing, Louis forced Wala and his siblings from the palace, into monasteries, and thus out of political life. For these three male cousins, the language is clear in medieval and modern historiography: they were victims of monastic exile.

Monastic exile had long been an important means for early medieval Franks to deal with political tension and conflict. The Merovingians, the previous Frankish ruling dynasty, placed (potential) political rivals in monasteries to subdue them, while other politically connected Franks chose retreat into monasteries when they themselves sought refuge from political life and protection from secular powers. Often, such monastic exiles were temporary, with the aristocrat able to leave the monastery when he chose, and the king able to recall exiled magnates back to the court (de Jong, 2001). If, however, an exile accepted monastic tonsure, gave up his sword belt, and took religious vows, then he was generally regarded as unable to return to lay or political life lest he break a solemn vow to God.

Einhard described the end of Merovingian kingship with the tonsuring of that hereditary line (2008, p. 18). He also narrated the decision of Pepin the Short's brother, Carloman (that is, Charlemagne's paternal uncle), to remove himself from political life and retreat to an Italian monastery (2008, p. 20). Charlemagne's rival Duke Tassilo would also end his political career (and attempts at rebellion) in a monastery, choosing to accept tonsure, rather than execution, alongside his son and other rivals of the king (Anonymous, 1972, pp. 66–67). And, in another noteworthy case,

when Pepin the Hunchback rebelled against his father in 791–2, Charlemagne responded with a sentence of monastic exile (Einhard, 2008, p. 33).

Monastic exile, a political strategy used amply by Charlemagne, became even more prevalent during the reign of Louis the Pious. After the suppression of his nephew Bernard of Italy's rebellion, the emperor, in spring 818, sent the rebels to monasteries. Included in this new group of monastic exiles were Louis's half-brothers, Drogo, Hugh, and Theodoric (Charlemagne's sons by concubines). Although nothing suggested their involvement in the rebellion, they had reached ages at which they might become political threats. As Thegan wrote, Louis "ordered that his brothers be tonsured to diminish discord, and commanded that they be educated in the liberal arts" (2009, p. 206).

Three years later, the emperor would employ the reversibility of monastic exile when he recalled his half-brothers Hugh and Drogo; in future years, the two would number among his closest supporters. Louis's female relatives would not, however, be called back, despite the emperor's overtures of familial reconciliation. Indeed, they were never heard from again. Their situation had been framed differently from their brothers': they had been removed from the palace not for political reasons, but for moral ones—forcefully highlighting the different treatment of powerful men and women.

As Mayke de Jong (2009) has shown, Frankish women were rarely "removed from the political arena by means of monastic exile," and the few cases of female monastic exile dated to the Merovingian period (p. 208). Royal women who possessed significant political clout were seldom described as powerful and thus exiled to convents. Rather, accusations of adultery or witchcraft were flung at them. Not just accusations, but also punishment and revenge were highly gendered: where men such as Bernard of Italy might be blinded for his rebellion (a means of removing one's future ability to rule), women were drowned as witches (Bührer-Thierry, 1998; de Jong, 2009, pp. 201–2).

When Louis the Pious entered an unfamiliar, even hostile, court in 814, he felt compelled to deal with female relatives who possessed more political, social, and cultural capital than he did. Unlike his male relatives, the women were not outright threats to the throne: how could they be in a Frankish world in which women were not allowed to rule? As Nelson (1996) has explained, "in the years around 800, in both eastern and western Christendom, any representation of female power was bound to be a sensitive and controversial area" (p. 230). The presence of a woman, Irene, on the Byzantine, or Eastern Roman, imperial throne (r. 797–802) offended the Franks and suggested the apocalypse's approach (Nelson, 1996, pp. 229–30; Latowsky, 2013, p. 14). Ninth-century writers blamed the wives of kings for exerting too much and too negative an influence over their husbands (Anonymous, 1972, p. 71; Einhard, 2008, pp. 26, 33; Ermold, 2009, pp. 163–7). As Nelson (1996) has explicated, "*femineum imperium* [the rulership of a woman] was a contradiction in terms—a monstrous regiment" (p. 230). Nor had the late Charlemagne specified how his son ought to deal with female political opponents. His 806 *Divisio regnorum* had insisted that his future heirs were not to unlawfully punish their male relatives, but no mention was made of how to handle the women, beyond allowing them to live under the protection of the brother of their choice; of course, in 814, only one brother was left, and he would not have been their preferred choice.

The Astronomer could claim that Louis was motivated by concerns that his sisters might start rival lines, but raising that concern alone would have legitimated Bertha's relationship with Angilbert and thus bolstered their sons' legitimacy (on the other hand, if a rival line was Louis's real concern, then why did the new emperor allow Nithard and Hartnid, sons of Bertha and Angilbert, to remain at court indefinitely?).

The true issue for Louis the Pious—and what the Astronomer and other ninth-century writers failed or refused to document—was the threat, not of rival heredity lines (nor, it should now go without saying, debauchery), but of the women's own authority and influence at the Frankish court. Theirs was an authority and influence that was exerted in informal, even intangible ways. And it was a much more serious power than the "female meddling in politics" that Scharer (2009) has claimed often provoked charges of immorality (p. 280).

No Frankish emperor could, however, have named that political threat, and so Louis instead proclaimed his female relatives' immorality. Doing so had the added bonuses of slandering the women indefinitely (and with no hope for a future return), undermining their relationships with their partners (and thus delegitimizing heirs such as Bertha's sons), and establishing a new, more moral court.

Thus, Louis the Pious never labeled his sisters as powerful or described their expulsion as a monastic exile akin to that of his half-brothers, cousins, and other rebellious courtiers. As historians, however, we must recognize the tales woven by Louis, the Astronomer, and others for what they are: deeply gendered reactions to political threat. We must, then, avoid language of sexual immorality and not allow ninth-century rhetoric about pollution and disorder to affect our interpretations of the events; so too ought we to refrain from calling Bertha Angilbert's "mistress" or "lover" simply because they were not officially married. Even if Louis the Pious or his biographer, the Astronomer, could not do it, we must begin to call the palace cleansing and expulsion of Louis's female relatives what it really was: the monastic exile or political tonsuring of individuals with significant political influence…who happened to be women.

Epilogue

When the Astronomer wrote about Louis's cleansing of the Aachen palace in 814, he did so from the vantage point of 840/1—just after Louis the Pious's death. He knew then, what the emperor could not have known upon his ascension: that in the 830s, Louis the Pious's own wife, Empress Judith, would be publicly accused of the very debauchery and arrogance of which he accused his sisters in 814. Judith, also accused of witchcraft, adultery, and incest, not to mention plotting regicide, would be twice removed from the imperial throne and placed (temporarily) in monasteries, as would Louis.

The deep irony behind claims, in the early 830s, that Louis the Pious's palace needed to be "cleansed" has not been lost on historians, such as Courtney Booker. Nor was it lost, he has argued, on the ninth-century opposition to Louis and Judith. Booker (2009) has explained, "The rebels' claim that they had been compelled to cleanse Louis' court doubtless draws on these well-known

deeds as a subtext" (p. 154). He later described this as one of the "great ironies of the many that characterize Louis the Pious's career"—that "early in his reign Louis fostered an ideological program within which he would later find himself enframed" (p. 214). The powerful Empress Judith became a victim of gendered slander, just as Bertha, her sisters, and her female relatives had less than two decades earlier.

Yet, both Emperor Louis and Empress Judith, after each removal from the throne, climbed their way back into power. They ultimately held onto their thrones until Louis's death in 840. The Astronomer, writing in the following year, could describe the 814 cleansing of the palace and the supposed debauchery of Charlemagne's female relatives with all the insight garnered from the recent scandals. He could even "project" them back "on to the transition of 814" (de Jong, 2009, p. 191).

Other writers in the early 840s also composed their texts with the knowledge of these various palace cleansings. Bertha's son Nithard, who remained at Louis the Pious's court after his mother's monastic exile, eventually transitioned to the camp of Louis and Judith's son, Charles the Bald. In the civil wars of 841–3, Charles requested that Nithard write a history capturing the volatile events; in doing so, Bertha's son became one of the greatest Carolingian historians. Despite opening his work with a retrospective of Charlemagne's and Louis's reigns, and having personal knowledge of his own mother's circumstances, Nithard was relatively silent on the matter of his mother. De Jong (2009) has read his words as "lacking in moral indignation," despite the fact that "his own mother Bertha was one of Louis's (half-) sisters banished 'to monasteries.'" She continued in her assessment: "For [Nithard,] the most important thing was, however, that Louis had endowed his legitimate sisters (including Bertha) with their rightful inheritance. As far as one can see, there was no particular resentment on the son's part about his mother's exile from the palace. Nithard had to accept this brave new world" (pp. 192–3).

Newer readings of Nithard's *Histories* reveal, however, the subtle ways in which Bertha's son demonstrated his resentment and moral indignation—criticizing Louis the Pious for his treatment of his siblings, praising Charles the Bald for his forgiveness of a rebellious sister, arguing for the legitimacy of Nithard's parents' relationship, and even asserting the sainthood of Nithard's father, Angilbert (Polanichka and Cilley, 2012). Yet, one would be hard-pressed to argue that Nithard possessed the words to express the political power that his mother, her sisters, and their other female relatives possessed. Nithard might have believed that his uncle, Louis the Pious, did not behave toward his sisters as a brother should, but he focused more on the injustice done to his mother, his parents' union, and thus his present circumstances than on the political, social, or cultural capital that forced his mother into monastic exile.

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