“You Would Do Better to Keep Your Mouth Shut:” The Significance of Talk in Sixth-Century Gaul

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In the past decade, historians have shown a growing interest in the implications of talk and gossip in medieval culture and society. Notable scholars of medieval talk studies, such as Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail, identify the diverse meanings that talk may have held for medieval people, who were often concerned with controlling society through the creation and shaping of reputations, good or bad.1 Within this scholarship, however, the absence of late antique or early medieval examples is notable and at the same time misleading. As with most topics, later medieval periods offer historians interested in talk studies a multitude of encounters with medieval society, whether it be through legal, literary, or civic sources. Gregory of Tours (539-594), the prominent voice of sixth-century Gaul, indicates, however, that this preoccupation with talk and gossip was not a late medieval phenomenon. But even as historians of talk studies have skipped over early medieval evidence, the topic of rumor and talk has not come to the attention of early medieval scholars either. Yet, in his Histories, Gregory of Tour’s commentary, whether intentional or not, on the uses and effects of talk suggests that the legal implications of rumor and gossip significantly informed political strategies and constructions of gender and agency in sixth-century Gaul. By considering the place of talk in the elite circle of clashing royalty, churchmen and counts, we see that by the sixth century gossip and defamation were viable and even preferable weapons against one’s political adversaries.

Incorporating early medieval examples into the scholarship of talk requires some effort in defining the parameters of gossip and talk in the

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worldview of Gregory of Tours. As a historian himself, Gregory is aware of the role of talk in contributing to his own sources for historical accounts. He occasionally categorizes the stories that he relays about the Hunnic invasions, the court of Theodoric, and the activities of Visigothic and Greek leaders as oral reports or rumors passed on to him. Gregory also considered the purpose that rumor may have served for his historical subjects, many of whom received their information concerning war from rumors or public commotion. Beyond this association with historiography and the relay of news, however, Gregory of Tours and the society that he depicts in his history is not only aware of the significance of talk, but also associates with it the negative connotations of rumor and gossip as manipulative devices in social, legal and political contexts.

A closer study of the language used to identify the process of rumor, gossip, and defamation reveals how Gregory and his early medieval contemporaries may have construed malicious talk and the speaker. Throughout the Histories, Gregory’s accounts of rumor and gossip do not indicate that there was one word that expressed to his reader all the negative implications of talk. The word rumor only appears three times in the pages of Gregory’s text and it is a word that is used to identify those stories whose origins are unknown or are lost in the mass of the populi. In the case of Eulalius, a count who was suspected of garroting his mother, the bishop Cautinus hesitated to grant him communion based on the rumors of his reputed murder that had spread throughout the community (rumor populi). The other cases in which Gregory refers to talk as rumors concern information considered public knowledge.

Despite the limited use of the word rumor, Gregory is attentive to the agents and contexts of talk. Gregory’s reference to malicious talk most frequently relies on more common words for conversation, such as sermones, collocutionum, and proloquuntur. In these cases, though, Gregory identifies either the people (mali homines) or what was said (dixisse crimen, calumnias, or blasphemas) in ways that leave little doubt as to how the bishop perceived the speakers or the topics that they discussed. Overall, though, Gregory’s depiction of sixth-century society is a society that vibrated with the sound of talk. In many cases, the spread of stories that Gregory traces do not have identifiable origins or lines of transmission, but talk nevertheless resonates throughout the community as sounds and noise (sonus) and into the ears of kings, queens and local authorities.

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3Ibid., X.8. Sed nescientibus cunctis, quis haec fecisset, crimen tamen parricidii refertur ad filium. . . . ‘Rumor populi parricidam te proclamant esse.’

4 Gregory of Tours, LH, II. 41 and IX. 38.
Since Gregory’s writing is intent on detailing the history of the rancorous Merovingian kings and queens and their relationship with ecclesiastical leaders, the political intrigue at the Frankish court reveals the prominence of talk as an essential tool in the politically contentious environment of sixth-century Gaul. As the bishop of Tours and a member of a prominent local family, Gregory’s perspective in the Histories highlights in particular the social network of talk controlled and utilized by local and royal leaders. Although the actions or speech of the common man in Gallic society occasionally appear in Gregory’s text, his concern is primarily with gossip and false accusations as tools among the church and civic authorities. According to anthropologist Max Gluckman, talk, and gossip in particular, has both negative and positive social advantages and it is not a tool reserved for one particular social group. Gossip operates within and throughout the social networks of professional groups and among exclusive groups, whether noble or marginalized. Moreover, gossip and the scandal that it may or may not intentionally create offer an opportunity to assess and even reorganize the relations within or between groups. Gluckman argues that gossip could compel “the group either to expel the person slandered or to turn on the gossiper. More than this, the process of scandal enables a group to evaluate people for their work, their qualities of leadership, and their moral character, without ever confronting them to their faces with failures in any sphere.” Gossip as a potential device for changing the balance within a social group, therefore, would be no less significant in the political and legal world of the Gallic elite. Bringing attention to the use of talk and gossip among nobles and churchmen in sixth-century Gaul reveals the mechanisms of a social network that has more often than not been vilified for its reliance on violence.

Gregory’s scalding opinion of the Merovingian dynasty gives the initial impression that the elites of this society were incapable of wielding political diplomacy, choosing instead to make political decisions with the sharp edge of a sword. In his narrative of Clovis’ sons, Gregory recalls for the reader the image of Childebert (d.558) and Chlothar I (d.561) brutally murdering their young nephews even as the sobbing boys clutched their uncles’ ankles. As for queen

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6 Gluckman, 313.
7 In his essay on gossip and medieval peasantry, Chris Wickham argues that the implications of gossip are perhaps most obvious in court records and the behavior of the elite. Moreover, Wickham argues against strictly defining gossip, advocating instead for a more flexible concept of gossip that only holds to the understanding that talking about people or their reputation has real social and political meaning. See Chris Wickham, “Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry,” Past & Present 160 (1998), 11 and 23.
8 Gregory of Tours, LH, III.18.
Fredegund (d.597), one of Gregory’s most detested Merovingian figures, when her efforts at diplomatic dispute settlement failed, the queen resorted to murdering the problematic party after an arranged feast. Given these examples, in addition to the seemingly immoral and bloodthirsty behavior of later kings such as Chlothar II (d. 629) and Chilperic (d. 584), the members of the Merovingian royal family are sometimes simplified as irrational, cruel rulers whose thirst for power too often exceeded their self-control, common sense or the pressure to adopt Christian, moral behavior. Gregory’s infamous depiction of the family extends to the entire society, though, and there seems no end to his accounts of assassinations, kidnappings, and bloody encounters between adversaries.

Considerations of the role of violence in Merovingian society have in the past attempted to challenge this assumption that sixth- and seventh-century Gaul was driven by an uncontrollable penchant for violence and physical brutality. Guy Hasall’s anthology, Violence in the Early Medieval West, offers reconsidereations of violence in the different social, literary, legal, and economic contexts of the early Middle Ages. For Gaul in particular, though, Paul Fouracre has questioned the role of violence in the seventh and eighth centuries according to the writings of Fredegar and his Carolingian successors. According to Fredegar, the seemingly cruel violence that was pervasive during the civil wars between the Merovingian courts unwarranted comment and later Carolingian authors sought to emphasize the vicious and maniacal nature of their predecessors. The example of Merovingian violence would only enhance the image of the Carolingian rulers whose own violent customs were often muted in the writings of contemporary authors. As Fouracre briefly comments, though, the case for violence in Gregory’s writings was one of morality, and therefore served to mark figures who had strayed from the mentorship of the church and its guidance. Violent and insulting may be appropriate characterizations for these men and women, especially given Gregory’s sensational stories of their mishaps, but as much as violence and brute force have come to define the political strategies of this society’s elites, the importance of information and the clever manipulation of talk demonstrates a political and legal consciousness that went beyond the points of swords or the shock of palace intrigue.

Whether it is news of approaching enemies, dying kings, inept

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9 Ibid., X.27.
10 See Peter Brown’s introduction to The World of Gregory of Tours, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and I. N. Wood (Boston: Brill, 2002). Brown remarks on the incredible resilience of these generalizations about Gregory and his society.
administration, or accusations of promiscuity and slander, talk rarely fails to elicit a response in Gregory of Tours’ world. In his description of the civil wars that dominated sixth-century Gaul, Ian Wood underscores the frequency with which kings were inaccurately reported dead. These episodes of the rumored deaths of kings reveal the network of talk that so often served the purposes of royal politics. When the news of Theuderic’s death echoes (sonuit) throughout Clermont-Ferrand, Childebert’s informant immediately sends a message to the king prompting him to take control of his brother’s city. Childebert wastes no time reacting to this news and it is only as his informant is sawing off the locks to the city’s gates that the king realizes that the rumor of his brother’s death was unfounded. Queens also made use of these networks of talk in order to execute their political plots. After assigning assassins to the murder of King Childebert, Fredegund sends a servant to listen to the local gossip (rumor populi) for any sign that her men had been successful. When it came to royal action, rumors and public conversation were always regarded as an important source of information.

In some circumstances, the clever use of fabricated stories and lies may have been a more effective tactic than even violence. In his efforts to gain control in those cities loyal to his father, king Clothar, Chramn insulted and chased off a count and his sister-in-law. Fearing exile, the two sought sanctuary in the cathedral where they hid from Chramn’s men. Eventually, though, the men surrounded the cathedral and snatched the two as they walked too closely by the church doors. Left simply as an example of abduction and manhandling, this episode seems only to support the assumption that violence was the preferred method of gaining the advantage in sixth-century political conflicts. Yet, Chramn’s men were not ruffians whose only talent or recourse in a conflict was to physical brutality. According to Gregory’s details, the two men who abducted Firmius and Caesaria were cunning storytellers whose various tricks of conversation (variis collocationum dolis) and lies kept Firmius and Caesaria so occupied as to leave them distracted and foolish enough to walk in front of the cathedral’s open doors.

As prominent as murder and abduction are in the pages of Gregory’s histories, there are just as many incidents where leaders rely seemingly only on insults to rid themselves of political competition. When Bishop Prius and his wife, Susanna, organized an elaborate effort to purge the city of their adversary, Bishop Nicetius, they sought to enlist gossipers who might participate in his humiliation. The bishop and his wife offered their friendship, no small advantage in a society

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15 Ibid., VIII.29.
that operated according to forged alliances, to anyone who would spread, or vomit out as Gregory characterizes it, insults (evomuisset inproperia) about Nicetius. 17 Neither Gregory nor his contemporaries interpreted conversation and talk as merely the benign communication of events; instead, the implications of talk weighed heavily on the minds of kings, counts and churchmen alike.

When we consider the intersection of talk and the settlement of disputes, there appears stronger evidence that the political machination among sixth-century elites was inexplicably tied to the legal system’s treatment of talk. 18 Wendy Davies, Paul Fouracre, and the contributors to their anthology on the settlement of disputes in the early Middle Ages have already revealed the presumption behind those claims that early medieval people preferred to resort to violence rather than legal routes to resolve conflict. Their work serves primarily to underscore the access to and preferences that these societies had for documentation and court procedure. 19 What has not been discussed, though, is the way in which accusers used talk and gossip to orchestrate the trial and judgment of their adversaries.

While realizing that Germanic law codes were prescriptive rather than descriptive, there is evidence of a social concern for the damage that insults, mockery, lies and other malicious uses of talk could have for reputations. In the Pactus Legis Salicae, which was drawn up initially between 507 and 511 by Clovis’ court, but expanded later by other sixth-century Merovingian kings, a lengthy chapter is devoted to articulating the crimes and retributions related to insults. 20 Those abusive remarks deserving monetary reparation include seemingly juvenile name-calling such as disparaging comparisons to louses, foxes, hares, or dung. 21 In addition to these relatively minor injunctions, each only drawing the rather minimal fine of three solidi, this chapter of the law code addresses talk that

17 Ibid., IV.36.
calls into question the honesty of members of the community. At the higher price of fifteen *solidi*, mistakenly labeling an individual a liar was a more costly misuse of one’s speech.\footnote{Ibid., XXX.6.} From this emphasis on the legal ramifications of talk, Gregory’s denotation of slander and insults using the phrase “to speak a crime” (*dixisse crimen*) proposes that sixth-century society had developed a legal consciousness that included an intent awareness of the significance of one’s speech. In conjunction with the laws, belittling or false speech then gains a more tangible place within society and provides some indication of the attention paid to a talker and his words.

Although there are no legal clauses established to address the defamation of clergy, who likely held their own courts, Gregory’s close attention to the episcopal history of his region in Gaul suggests that the divine retribution for false accusations was no less stringent than legal consequences. The sixth-century cleric’s reputation was constantly under attack and vulnerable to accusations of sexual lewdness or corrupt management of church affairs. While dining at the table of King Guntram, bishops Palladius and Bertram devolved into a battle of insults, which included accusations of adultery and fornication.\footnote{Gregory of Tours, \textit{LH}, VIII.7.} In an attempt to ruin the reputation of Aetherius, conspirators even burst into the seventy-year old bishop’s bedroom shouting rumors that they had just seen a young woman leave his bed.\footnote{Ibid., VI.36.}

According to Gregory, however, degradation of a holy man resulted in a swift and harsh punishment. In a priest’s dreams, Nicetius returned along with two other bishops to confront the man who had “covered [him] with blasphemies.”\footnote{Gregory of Tours, \textit{Life of the Fathers}, trans. and ed, Edward James (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), c. 70.} When his colleagues confirmed that “it is indeed wicked to disparage a servant of God,” Nicetius proceeded to punch and slap the priest’s throat, all the while shouting “Sinner you ought to be crushed underfoot; cease your stupid mutterings!”\footnote{Ibid.} Once the bishop delivered this warning, the priest supposedly learned to control his tongue. For another priest, his own death interrupted the stream of invectives that he persisted in leveling at a recently deceased bishop.\footnote{Gregory of Tours, \textit{LH}, V.46.} The risks, either legal or divine, that came with derisive talk were daunting enough to dissuade even Gregory, who rarely avoids scandalous details, from discussing the deeds of a bishop whom many had regarded as wicked. Gregory seeks to appease the curious reader on the grounds that he did not...

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\footnote{22 Ibid., XXX.6.} \footnote{23 Gregory of Tours, \textit{LH}, VIII.7.} \footnote{24 Ibid., VI.36.} \footnote{25 Gregory of Tours, \textit{Life of the Fathers}, trans. and ed, Edward James (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), c. 70.} \footnote{26 Ibid.} \footnote{27 Gregory of Tours, \textit{LH}, V.46.}
not wish to become a “denigrator of his fellow churchman.”

The condemnation of gossipers and those seeking to degrade the reputation of others seems to have characterized public opinion as well. When recalling his own trial, in which he was accused of slandering the queen, Gregory records a carpenter's forceful censure of a false accuser: “What a wretched creature you are, to conspire and plot against your own Bishop in this contumacious way! You would do better to keep your mouth shut, to ask your Bishop's pardon and so once more obtain his grace.”

Although Modestas' defense of Gregory may be only evidence of Gregory's bias as a bishop and the accused, it does portray a society instructed to see talk as dangerous and more commonly the tools of politics than public justice.

In addition to the centrality of talk and invectives in the political machinations of Merovingian royalty and Gallic society, the implications that talk, and slander especially, had for women offer significant commentary on the intersections between gender and law. Although women in German legal codes are protected predominantly for their reproductive potential, these codes suggest that protecting the reputation of women was the next highest priority of their families. According to Salian law, allegations of prostitution or witchcraft were the most notable derisions that detractors could make of a woman's character. Daring to call a freewoman a prostitute without any proof earned a steep fine of forty-five solidi. Murdering a woman of childbearing age under the protection of the king was accompanied by the hefty price of 1200 solidi; the wergeld of women disconnected from the royal household was half that. At only forty-five solidi, slandering a woman's reputation by calling her a prostitute then seems an inexpensive trespass, but it is comparable to other physical violations such as cutting the hair or the breast of a freewoman. Falsely naming a woman a witch (striam) brought fines equivalent to that of the rape of a freewoman or kidnapping a woman under the king's protection. And although we have no record in the law code for the defamation of queens, Gregory of Tours' accounts

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28 Gregory of Tours, LH, V.5.
30 Suzanne Wemple's Women in Frankish Society still stands as the foundational work for historians interested in wives and nuns of this period, but her project was not intended to highlight how women's identities were shaped by the speech of others. Suzanne Fonay Wemple, Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).
34 Ibid., XV.2 and XIII.6.
of Brunhild (d.613) and Fredegund suggest that insulting royal women could result in charges of high treason and subsequent punishments of exile or even execution.

The legal ramifications of slandering women gain more weight when compared to similar spoken crimes concerning the reputation of men. Calling a man a coward, and thus disparaging his character, was an infraction valued only at three solidi.\textsuperscript{35} Meanwhile, simply pulling (five solidi), uncovering (fifteen solidi), or releasing from its restraints (thirty solidi) the hair of women earned not only higher fines, but also more acknowledgment in the law.\textsuperscript{36} Denouncing women as prostitutes, witches or disheveling their appearance were not efforts to physically hurt but rather to shame women and their families. Since Germanic law codes were devised for the most part to provide a preventative measure against blood feuds, the incorporation of chapters meant to address the ridicule and shaming of women, therefore, suggests that such incidents were common instigators of violence between families. Gregory’s accounts reveal the anxiety that women and their families experienced when attempting to quell the rumors or gossip of shameful behavior. When her husband’s family accused a Parisian noblewoman of conducting an illicit liaison, they demanded that her father either correct these rumors or permit her death. In order to confirm his daughter’s innocence and disprove what he considered to be the words of evil men, the father consented to give his oath at the tomb of St. Denis. The family of the supposedly cuckholded husband, however, was not satisfied with his testimony and after denouncing him as a perjurer, a bloody fight erupted over the altar. The families eventually brought their case to trial, but the woman’s suicide settled the dispute before the verdict was announced.\textsuperscript{37} From this example, it easy to see how talk concerning the reputation of women could be an incendiary factor in the community, and likewise how the slandering of women could garner a place within the legal framework of sixth-century Gaul.

Gregory’s observations of dispute settlements and the political intrigue that surrounded the courts of Queens Brunhild and Fredegund suggest that the reputation of women had become a common, legal mechanism of political action, and a tactic more likely to be implemented by men than the women whose reputations were involved. For Merovingian queens, arresting opponents for having allegedly cast slanderous accusations about them could lead to the subsequent charge of treason and punishments of exile or even the death of political enemies. According to Gregory, however, the reputations of husbands were inextricably bound with that of their wives. When asked by popular outrage why he continued with the trial of Gregory regarding the bishop’s alleged slander

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., XXX.6.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., CIV.1-3. See also XXIV.3 on cutting the hair of freewomen.
\textsuperscript{37} Gregory of Tours, \textit{LH}, V.32.
of Fredegund, Chilperic claims that the “slander (crimen) of my wife is considered my shame (opprobrium).”

If the accommodation of slander in legal codes was an initiative of kings to enhance their political maneuvers against conniving aristocrats or churchmen, there is no evidence that royalty alone monopolized this combination of talk and law. In fact, counts and other nobility most frequently invoked the legal consequences of slander, particularly against churchmen. Accusing one's enemy of slandering a queen was an effective way of seeing to his arrest and trial. Abbot Lupentius, an alleged slanderer of Queen Brunhild, traveled to the queen's court at her summoning only to be cleared of all charges of treason (de crimine maiestatis). This verdict, however, did not satisfy Innocentius, his accuser, and the count's men ambushed the abbot on his return trip. After kidnapping Lupentius, Innocentius' men decapitated and threw his body into the river. If the charges of slander against the abbot had held, the count would have avoided murdering a churchman and inadvertently making a martyr of his adversary. Innocentius' accusations of slander seem to have been merely an invocation of the queen's reputation with the intention of serving his own political grudges rather than any concern for Brunhild's character.

In one of the most detailed accounts of his Histories, Gregory recalls his own trial for the slander of Queen Fredegund. The circumstances of his charges, trial, and the resolution of this confrontation underscore the connections among law, politics, and talk. Like Lupentius' case, Gregory's was prompted by the accusations of a political opponent. Leudast, who was count of Tours at the time, had through the patronage of Charibert's queen, worked his way to his position as a civil authority from the lowly rank of slave. Leudast's relationship with Gregory, however, was tenuous at best. His habit of physically abusing priests coupled with negligence toward his judicial responsibilities eventually made him an enemy of the bishop and town members alike, and later earned his deposition by Chilperic. Facing the loss of his civic privileges, Leudast began a campaign, enlisting other churchmen envious of Gregory's episcopal assignment, to humiliate and incriminate the bishop. Leudast insinuated to Chilperic that the bishop was conspiring with the king's brother to undercut his authority in Tours. When this failed to elicit a response, he switched tactics to incriminating Gregory

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38 Ibid., VI.49.
39 Gregory of Tours, LH, VI. 37.
40 Ibid., V. 48.
41 By the time of Gregory’s bishopric, the authority of civic administrations had already begun to pale in comparison to that of bishops and episcopal figures. In fact, Gregory is the one who initially reappoints Leudast as count at the recommendation of Chilperic’s son, Theudebert. Gregory of Tours, LH, V.48. See also Geary, Before France and Germany, 131-2.
as a slanderer of queens, claiming he had denounced Fredegund as an adulteress, whose liaisons were with a bishop no less.\textsuperscript{42} Later, the count along with his conspirators, who served as false witnesses according to Gregory, stirred up Tours with such maligning accusations against the bishop that the royal court had no choice but to resolve the controversy by holding Gregory on trial for slander.\textsuperscript{43} Talk and the spread of these malicious lies, therefore, were crucial to Leudast's plot to regain the patronage of the king and thus his position as count of Tours. The trial alone, elaborate with false testimonies, debates over rumors, and public disturbances, demonstrates the volatility of insults, slander, and reputation in Gallic society.

Taunting remarks or insults to queens were not always empty words, however. As much as the slander of women was a tool used by men against men, the queens whose reputations were called into question did not always merely serve to further the political clashes amongst men. Just as counts and members of the royal family relied on insults and degradation to drive their enemies away, men who opposed queens or their sons occasionally had the same intentions when mocking royal women. When Chilperic had Riculf, Leudast's conspirator, arrested and tortured, the nearly dead priest eventually confessed to plotting the succession of Clovis, Chilperic's son by his first wife, Audovera. Although accusing Gregory of vilifying the queen had its advantages for Leudast's and Riculf's political aspirations at the local level, these two supporters of Clovis had also hoped that upon hearing these rumors the king would either dismiss Fredgund or that the queen would flee her court, unable to withstand the humiliation. With her gone from the court, the path to the throne would be cleared for Audovera's son. Using humiliation to distance the queen from her king and supporters was a common tactic of discontent nobility. Gregory describes the bitter relations between Brunhild and Duke Rauching, for whom the humiliation of the queen seems to have been a persistent habit. Rauching had humiliated the queen in the years following the death of her husband and later endeavored to do the same again in his efforts as Chilperic's ally.\textsuperscript{44} Driving off wives and mothers did more than provide a method of removing a political opponent or freeing a sought-after position in church or town, as was the case with Prius and Nicetius or Leudast and Gregory. Instead, such machinations were likely efforts to destabilize royal lines. With mothers and wives gone, the unprotected sons of kings could more easily come under the control of another noble family or even end up murdered, thus allowing for other wives and their families to gain access to the royal household.

Although Gregory implies that the true crime of slander was not against

\textsuperscript{42} Gregory of Tours, \textit{LH}, V.47.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., V.49.
\textsuperscript{44} Gregory of Tours, \textit{LH}, IX.9.
women but against their male relatives, examples of this crime in the *Histories* suggest that those accused of slandering royal women could be forced to either approach the royal court or even the queens themselves for the restoration of their rank. Having the reputation of a slanderer, with its legal and social implications, was politically paralyzing. Hindered by his reputation as a slanderer of queens, Leudast eventually sought the pardon of his king and queen in order to regain his appointment as count. Although the king was willing to reinstate Leudast, he warned the count to wait until he had softened Fredegund’s temper. Deciding to seek the queen’s favor himself, Leudast approached her in the cathedral and groveled for her mercy. Without sons to avenge her, Fredegund lamented her helplessness, claiming to leave Leudast’s fate to God. In the end, though, Fredegund avenged her honor when Leudast was imprisoned and executed at the queen’s command. His execution, which was carried out by beating his throat in with a piece of wood, seemed appropriate to Gregory, who claimed that Leudast’s “life had been one long tale of perfidious talk, so that he met a fitting end.” Without overstating the authority of queens, the legal procedure and social stigma associated with slander and false accusation may have brought a queen’s enemies more fully under her influence and power.

Gregory’s treatment of gossip also highlights the gendered bodies and spaces through which talk spread. Because of the legal connotation that talk had for Gregory and his contemporaries, the bishop’s discussion of rumor and scandal often illuminates the courts of bishops and kings. But despite their accessibility to a variety of members of society, public spaces in sixth-century cities were dominated by the voices of bishops and counts. In the case of the defamation of Nicetius, the priest had spread rumors about the bishop in a public space after the reading of Nicetius’ will. And in the power struggles among the kings, queens, sons, and bishops the city became a space networked to transmit information. Although the reputation of women was often pivotal in these cases, men were the primary spreaders and hearers of such slanderous talk. Since women were not

45 Nira Gradowicz-Pancer argues from this episode that the violent measures of queens in Merovingian Gaul were not masculine performances, but rather a testament to the legitimate efforts of upper class women to protect their own honor in a society that conducted itself according to an “exchange of honor.” See Gradowicz-Pancer, “De-gendering female violence: Merovingian female honor,” *Early Modern Europe* 11, no.1 (2002), 10-11.


permitted to represent or speak for themselves in courts of law according to Germanic legal procedure, even when Fredegund attended with the king the trial regarding the slandering of her own reputation, she does not speak. Her husband, however, remarks that he had first heard the rumor of the queen’s affair from Leudast.49

Women, however, do occasionally act as gossips in Gregory’s Histories, but in such a way that they come to exemplify in behavior and appearance the very criticisms that Gregory has of talk. As punishment for the defamation of Nicetius, Susanna is forced to run through the city lauding the holiness and mercy of the bishop. Even though her gossip is fashioned as elaborate praise for the bishop, Gregory describes her appearance as bedraggled, with her hair shamefully down around her shoulders, and her gossip and speech as provoked by the demons that possessed her.50 Among the few examples of women as the spreaders of talk in Gregory’s Histories, there is further evidence that the bishop related female speech with devil possession. During his contentious competition with Cautinus for the bishopric of Clermont-Ferrand, Cato bribes a woman to act as though she were possessed and to call out in the church his saintly reputation while denouncing his opponent as a criminal.

And while they managed to remain more dignified than lower-status female gossips, queens, according to Gregory, were not above manipulative talk. Like their male relatives, Merovingian queens were aware of and adept at the use of rumor and gossip in their own plots to promote their families and supporters. Fredegund attempted to bribe many bishops, including Gregory, to speak false charges against an episcopal ally of Brunhild whom Chilperic and his queen wished to arrest and exile.51 In order to gain vengeance against Eberulf, the treasurer who according to Gregory had spurned Fredegund’s interests, the queen tried to provoke King Guntram against him with insinuations that he had arranged for the murder of her husband.52 While he does not compare Fredegund to a raving madwoman or her gossip to the speech of the possessed, Gregory does reduce the queen’s talk to the petty and spiteful resentment of a jilted lover.

Beyond the usually masculine-dominated spaces of the cathedral and court, Gregory’s concern for the spread of talk also offers a brief glimpse into women’s spaces and the context of talk for the female listener. In his account of yet another conspiracy to murder Brunhild and her son, Childebert, Gregory traces the spread of rumors through the household of the wives of kings. While Faileuba, Childebert’s queen, was recovering from the birth and death of her

49 Gregory of Tours, LH, V.49.
50 Gregory of Tours, LH, IV.36.
51 Ibid., V.18.
52 Ibid., VII.21.
child, she overhears talk (sermo) of a plot against her and Brunhild. As the story unfolds, the household discovers that the nurse to the royal children, along with her lover, another aid to the royal children, and the Count of Stables were seeking to persuade Childebert to abandon his wife and exile his mother. If persuasion proved unsuccessful, then the alternative method of influence was to be witchcraft, which the nurse claimed to have already wielded successfully against her husband. This episode of palace intrigue highlights the network of talk within elite households, which is remarked upon less in the sources because of the usual emphasis on masculine-centered spaces such as courts and churches. Shedding light into these spaces, however, allows Gregory to stress the ominous and far-reaching significance of talk in sixth-century Gaul, even as it permeated the bedrooms of queens, those areas where servants convened, and possibly even the spaces assigned to children.

Gregory of Tours’ preoccupation with the speech of his contemporaries and the criticism that he gives to those who exploit abusive or deceitful speech gives all the indications that the early Middle Ages was a period that resonated with the implications of talk. The sixth-century count’s and bishop’s reliance on false accusations, insults, and lies to gain the advantage over political foes suggests that words rather than swords were the preferred weapons of this period’s leaders. For the elite men and women of sixth-century Gaul, the legal consequences of slander partnered with the importance of women’s reputations offered a political tactic that could easily entangle opponents in unfortunate legal procedures that could end in exile or execution. Although the legal implications for slandering women were most often used by men against men, women do occasionally emerge from the text of Gregory’s Histories as contributors and even manipulators of talk. From Gregory’s perspective, talk was rarely if ever conceived as a method of character aggrandizement; instead, Modestas’ warning to Riculf on the virtues of silence likely echoed Gregory’s own sentiment on the use of talk in early medieval Gaul.

53 Gregory of Tours, LH, IX.18.