

**Pour citer cet article :** Aali, Heta, « Fredegonde – Great Man of the nineteenth century », *Les Grandes figures historiques dans les Lettres et les Arts* [En ligne], 02 | 2013, URL : <http://figures-historiques.revue.univlille3.fr/n-2-2013/>.

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## **Fredegonde – Great Man of the nineteenth century**

Il serait difficile de trouver dans notre histoire un personnage  
dont le caractère, dont les actions, les vices et les talents  
aient été plus remarquables, et soient mieux connus que ceux  
de Frédégonde.<sup>1</sup>

Philippe le Bas (1794-1860), Hellenist and archaeologist, described in the quotation above the seventh-century Frankish queen Fredegonde (d. 597) whose short biography he included in his large, mostly biographical, dictionary of the history of France. According to le Bas, Fredegonde was one of the best known personages of French history due to her talents, actions and vices. Similarly, for many of le Bas's contemporaries, Fredegonde symbolised the seventh century with all its wars, bloodshed and immoral decadence. No one could imagine the Merovingian period (from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) without this queen who was wife to Chilperic I (d. 585) and mother to Clothar II (d. 628).

Not very much is known about Fredegonde but according to American medievalist Steven Fanning she was most probably of low birth and became a queen and Chilperic's chief wife "by eliminating her rivals." The murder of Galeswinthe caused a "feud" between, on the one hand, Chilperic, and on the other hand his brother Sigebert and the latter's wife Brunehilde, Galeswinthe's sister. Fredegonde has been

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Le Bas, *L'Univers. France: dictionnaire encyclopédique*, Tome 8, Paris, Firmin Didot Frères, 1840-1845, p. 483.

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blamed for several murders, including Sigebert's in 575. Fanning however wrote that "The extremely hostile accounts of her [Fredegonde] by Gregory of Tours and in the later *Liber Historiae Francorum* have left her with a reputation of being an embodiment of evil, a scheming murderess whose wiles led Chilperic I to commit his worst excesses. [...] After Chilperic's assassination in 584, Fredegunde preserved the kingdom for her son Clotar II during his minority. Despite her evil reputation, Fredegunde was a dominant and capable politician."<sup>2</sup>

In this article Fredegonde's role in early nineteenth-century historiography will be analysed from the point of view of the concept of "Great Man" which has a double meaning here. First of all it refers to the nineteenth-century desire to emphasise the role of Great Individuals in the history of France. Was Fredegonde comparable to such figures as Clovis I or Charlemagne<sup>3</sup>? Secondly it refers to the dilemma of gender. The nineteenth century was indeed a century of Great Men as most of the great figures in history were *men* and most historians highlighted the role of *men* in creating the French civilisation. Biographical writings about males were used as a pedagogical tool for shaping masculinity and emphasising the great deeds of extraordinary male individuals. These writings were used to demonstrate how the force of character of certain men could affect whole nations. For women, on the contrary, biographies presented role models for ideal bourgeois ladies<sup>4</sup>. Analysing biographical material written about Fredegonde will reveal that she did not fit into the strict category of female gender as it was constructed and defined by historians and

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Fanning, "Fredegunde," in *Medieval France. An Encyclopedia*, ed. William W. Kibler and Grover A. Zinn, New York and London, Garland Publishing, 1995, p. 370.

<sup>3</sup> About Clovis, see Christian Amalvi, *Les Héros des Français. Controverses autour de la mémoire nationale*, Paris, Larousse, 2011, p. 22-23; about Charlemagne, see Robert Morrissey, "Charlemagne," in *Rethinking France. Les Lieux de Mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, Vol. 1, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Spongberg, *Writing Women's History since the Renaissance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 111.

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writers following the ideals set down by contemporary society<sup>5</sup>. For example the Napoleonic Civil Code of 1803 declared that natural law was the basis for males' right to govern over females<sup>6</sup>. The male gender was perceived by historians as *naturally* superior to the female, which led to viewing Fredegonde in a sense as an anti-woman—neither an ideal woman nor a man.

I have chosen to focus on the periods of the Restoration (1815-1830) and the July Monarchy (1830-1848) as during this time there were major changes in scientific historiography which had an impact on the highly popular biographical literature genre. Biography was often perceived as a feminine historiographical genre, and the nineteenth century was the golden age of this specific genre. The number of collections of female biographies, biographical dictionaries and individual biographies of great women grew extensively, especially during the first half of the century<sup>7</sup>. According to French historian Isabelle Ernot the number of biographies written by women grew until the 1860's when their numbers started to decrease due to various reasons. One reason was that biographies were mainly based on second-hand sources, and the new historiographical discourse of the 1850's discredited this method of relying on second-hand sources<sup>8</sup>. For my material, I shall draw on seven large biographical collections, and out of these, four were written by women. Biographies of famous women were not, therefore, a purely feminine genre; it attracted many men

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<sup>5</sup> See about the construction of gender, Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the politics of history*, Columbia, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 55sqq.

<sup>6</sup> Eliane Gubin, *Choisir l'histoire des femmes*, Bruxelles, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2007, p. 15 and 18. For the Civil Code, see Sarah Hanley, "The Salic Law," in *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women*, ed. Christine Fauré, New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Spongberg, *Writing Women's History*, *op. cit.*, p. 110. See also about biographies: Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History. Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Isabelle Ernot, "Masculin/féminin dans les dictionnaires et recueils de biographies féminines (début XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle-années 1860)," in *Histoires d'historiennes*, éd. Nicole Pellegrin, Saint-Étienne, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2006, p. 83-84.

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writers as well. Yet they were all mainly written for women. Thus what I examine in fact is how Fredegonde was presented to female readers of the nineteenth century.

It is noteworthy that there are no entire works dedicated to Fredegonde. The reasons for the lack of full-length biographies will be discussed at the close of my article once we have studied how writers viewed her in other works. She was the only one lacking an entire biography, since other famous queens from the Merovingian period, such as Brunhilde (d. 612/3), Clotilde (d. 545), Radegonde (d. 585) and Bathild (d. 680), all had books written about them. Studying the representation of early medieval queens reveals that, with the exception of Brunhilde, the more space these queens were given in the religious and moral biographical genre, the less space they got in academic historiographical genre. Fredegonde's role in seventh-century history was thus also examined by several well known historians such as Claude Fauriel and Simonde de Sismondi whereas Radegonde and Bathilde were almost completely left out of their works<sup>9</sup>. Focusing my study on biographies only will allow a more thorough insight on how Fredegonde was viewed in a literature aimed towards female readers, while academic historiography was mostly written by men for other men.

Before starting to examine the nineteenth-century biographies of Fredegonde it is important to look into the eighteenth-century material written about her. Fredegonde

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<sup>9</sup> For example Claude Fauriel in his *Histoire de la Gaule méridionale sous la domination des conquérants germains* (1836) did not mention Bathilde at all. Simonde de Sismondi in his *Histoire de la chute de l'Empire romain et du déclin de la civilisation, de l'an 250 à l'an 1000* (1835, Tomes 1 and 2) mentioned Fredegonde nine times and Bathilde and Radegonde both only once. Similarly for example Francois René de Chateaubriand (1832), Abel Hugo (1837) and Jules Michelet (1833) concentrated on Fredegonde far more than on Radegonde and Bathilde. This applied also to women historians: Sophie de Maraise mentioned Bathilde only a couple of times in her *Histoire de France* (1821) and Amable Tastu in her *Cours d'Histoire de France* (1836) did not mention Bathilde at all. Clotilde was venerated as converting Clovis to Christianity; see for example Amalvi, *Héros des Français, op. cit.*, p. 28. There are no moral biographies of Brunhilde either, only one short text written by Paulin Paris. Studying Fredegonde as she is represented in academic historiography is, however, another research topic.

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did not become such a popular figure out of nothing: her biographical representations were firmly rooted in the previous century and especially in revolutionary historiography dealing with the early medieval Frankish monarchs. As French historian Agnès Graceffa, the only one who has studied Fredegonde's role in French historiography, stated in her article *Le pouvoir dérégulé: Frédégonde, Brunehaut, et l'historiographie masculine moderne*, during the revolutionary years Fredegonde became the incarnation of the aristocratic anti-French personage and of the *reines maudites*<sup>10</sup>. One of the most famous texts where she was compared to Marie-Antoinette and Catherine de' Medici was a short pamphlet *Antoinette d'Autriche ou Dialogue entre Catherine de Médicis et Frédégonde, reines de France, aux enfers*, published in 1789<sup>11</sup>. A rather similar text was written in 1791 by Louise Félicité Guinement de Keralio Robert, called *Les crimes des reines de France, depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu'à Marie-Antoinette*, which was reprinted several times during the early nineteenth century<sup>12</sup>. According to an Australian historian, Mary Spongberg, Keralio used the symbol of the "reine maudite" to oppose the French monarchy<sup>13</sup>.

These works greatly influenced later historiography concerning the early queens even though there were other works as well about Fredegonde, prior to the Revolution of 1789<sup>14</sup>. It is noteworthy that the pre-revolutionary works highlighted Fredegonde's

<sup>10</sup> Agnès Graceffa, "Le pouvoir dérégulé: Frédégonde, Brunehaut et l'historiographie masculine moderne," in *Il mondo alla rovescia. Il potere delle donne visto dagli uomini*, ed. Silvia Luraghi, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2009, p. 25–38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31. See also the anonymous work *Antoinette d'Autriche ou Dialogue entre Catherine de Médicis et Frédégonde, reines de France, aux enfers*, London, [unknown publisher], 1789.

<sup>12</sup> See the catalogue of the French National Library (accessed on the 29 August 2012): <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/servlet/biblio?idNoeud=1&ID=36280939&SN1=0&SN2=0&host=catalogue>

<sup>13</sup> Spongberg, *Writing Women's History*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Jean-Francois Dreux du Radier (1714-1780) in his highly interesting *Mémoires historiques, critiques et anecdotes des reines et régentes de France*, first published in 1776 and reprinted in the beginning of the nineteenth century. To quote another instance, Jacques Marie Boutet de Monvel (1745-1812) wrote the popular *Frédégonde et Brunehaut, roman historique*.

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relations to, and rivalry with, queen Brunhilde, something which cannot be ignored when studying the representation of this specific early medieval queen. The comparison between both women was an essential part of historiography, both the biographical genre and the academic genre studying the Merovingian period during the Restoration and the July Monarchy<sup>15</sup>. In the twentieth century Fredegonde has been largely left in the shadow of Brunhilde in academic historiography, but considering her role as a central figure earlier she deserves to be examined as an individual<sup>16</sup>. The early nineteenth century was truly Fredegonde's moment in the spotlight.

### **Biographies in the early nineteenth century**

Popular biographical dictionaries of famous women always included Fredegonde. Her biographies varied extensively in terms of length. The shortest one only measures three lines whereas the longest one stretches over sixty pages. The biographies became longer with time, since the shorter biographies are found at the beginning of the Restoration and the length increased towards the end of the July Monarchy. The number of biographies also grew towards the middle of the century along with other historiographical material.

The earliest biographical dictionary where Fredegonde was mentioned was Gabrielle de Plancy's (b. 1793) *Année des Dames*<sup>17</sup>. The work was an almanac where each day had its own biography of a famous woman. The almanacs were mainly

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<sup>15</sup> This method of comparison and juxtaposition has by no means disappeared. See for example Larousse: "[...] En lutte avec Brunehaut, sœur de Galswinthe, elle fit tuer Sigebert (575), époux de Brunehaut, qu'elle tint en captivité, puis Mérovée et Clovis, fils de Chilpéric." <http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/personnage/Frédégonde/120270> (accessed on the 31 December 2012).

<sup>16</sup> See for example Bruno Dumézil's study about Brunhilde where Fredegonde is hardly mentioned at all: B. Dumézil, *Brunehaut*, Paris, Le Grand livre du mois, 2008.

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aimed towards young female readers as the author herself stated in the introduction<sup>18</sup>. According to Plancy Fredegonde had died the 28 of February and her biography went as following: “Frédégonde, femme de Chilpéric I<sup>er</sup>, mère de Clotaire II, reine de France, mourut le 28 février 597”<sup>19</sup>. The reason why Plancy said nothing else of her besides her title, her husband’s and son’s names and the year of her death can be deduced from the work’s introduction. There she wrote: “Quoique le nombre des méchantes femmes ne soit pas très-grand, on les a supprimées toutes les fois qu’on l’a pu, pour ne conserver que des souvenirs honorables ou gracieux.”<sup>20</sup> This can be interpreted as meaning that according to Plancy there was nothing “honourable” or “gracious” in Fredegonde other than her position as Chilperic’s wife and as a queen of France and therefore, instead of writing negative things about her, she decided not to say anything<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps for example Brunhilde was also seen by Plancy as a “méchante” woman as she was completely left out.

Why was then Fredegonde included in the almanac if Plancy did not want to say anything about her? Plancy needed Fredegonde in order to create a coherent picture of

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<sup>17</sup> Plancy’s work is an almanac; its full title is *Année des Dames, ou petite biographie des femmes célèbres pour tous les jours de l’année* (Paris, Crevot, 1820) and it includes two volumes. There is some confusion about the works of Gabrielle Plancy as she was sometimes referred to as Gabrielle Paban. She had a cousin, Collin de Plancy, who also was a writer. Collin de Plancy was a demonologist and an occultist, and wrote about related themes. He also wrote some works under the pseudonym of his cousin and this is why Gabrielle was sometimes mentioned as the author his demonological works. The themes seem so different that the existence of two authors is clear as also the question of which one wrote the almanacs. See Joseph Marie Guérard, *La France littéraire, ou Dictionnaire bibliographique des savants, historiens et gens de lettres de la France*, Paris, Firmin Didot, 1834, p. 540; Rosemary Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Demons and Demonology*, Infobase Publishing, 2009, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> According to Plancy, it is suitable reading for young girls (*Année des Dames, op. cit.*, p. vij).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vij. About the quotation, see also Ernot, “Masculin/feminin,” *op. cit.*, p. 72-73.

<sup>21</sup> According to Isabelle Ernot, women historians tried not to say anything negative about historical women, *ibid.*, p. 67-84. Though, interestingly, Plancy stated that Clotilde showed “un penchant pour la vengeance,” a penchant for vengeance (*Année des Dames, op. cit.*, p. 218).

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the history of France where monarchy, as it was known in the 1820's, existed already in the Merovingian period. She also depicted the early medieval succession of crown and marriage as identical to later centuries. The queens presented in the almanac and their husbands formed a neat chronological chain (with the husbands in parentheses): first Clotilde (wife of Clovis I who was identified as king of France), then Radegonde (married to Clovis's son Clothar I), Fredegonde (married to Clothar's son Chilperic), Nantilde (married to Dagobert I, who was the son of Clothar II, who in turn was identified in Fredegonde's biography as her son) and lastly Bathild (married to Clovis II who in Nantilde's biography was identified as Dagobert's son)<sup>22</sup>. The writer did not mention the kings' polygamy or that there were several kings ruling at the same time. In other words, Plancy implicitly presented the Merovingian period as identical to Old Regime by eliminating the features that distinguished it from later centuries, especially as far as the monarchy was concerned. By conceptually extending the kings and queens of France to the Merovingian period, she connected those times to a larger entity called the history of France. Two persons could not be simultaneously queens of France (or kings of France) so the writer had to choose, if she wanted to apply the concept to the Merovingian period, who was the one and only queen of France.

Desire to present history as a chronological ensemble might have been another reason why Brunhilde was not included in the work and Fredegonde was. The choice was made according to their husbands' and kingdoms' position. In works where Merovingian kings were listed in chronological order, as they were in the medieval and early modern period, Chilperic was always named, among the sons of Clothar I, as the king of France, because he held Paris in his power. The tradition of considering the king holding Paris as the king of France was still quite common in the beginning of the Restoration period as it also solved the problem of several simultaneous kings. Interestingly this interpretation of history was especially upheld in school manuals

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Tome I: Bathilde, p. 42; Clotilde, p. 218; *ibid.*, Tome II: Radegonde, p. 63; Nantilde, p. 119-220.

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and in educational books even though it disappeared from academic history discourse<sup>23</sup>. So the queen of France had to be Fredegonde. Leaving her out would have meant breaking the chronological order.

Next I will examine Louis Marie Prudhomme's (1752-1830) voluminous *Biographie Universelle et Historique des femmes célèbres*, published in 1830<sup>24</sup>. Prudhomme was not in fact the author of the *Biographie* but the publisher. The writer or writers are unknown<sup>25</sup>. It was quite exceptional that only the publisher was indicated, but Prudhomme seems to have been rather famous in his field. Notably he was also the publisher of Keralio's *Les crimes des reines de France*, published almost forty years earlier. The composition of Prudhomme's later work was different from Plancy's work where the writer only included "exemplary" women to be presented. Prudhomme has also included notorious women, as the title states. Prudhomme included almost every queen from the Merovingian period, even with little available information. As in Plancy's work, they were all, if defined, queens of France. Not

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<sup>23</sup> See for example Jean Nicolas Lorient, *Histoire de France, à l'usage de la jeunesse*, Lyon, Rusand et cie., 1831, p. 5-13; Laure Boen de Saint-Ouen, *Histoire de France, depuis l'établissement de la monarchie jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, L. Colas, 1830, p. 11-12; Louis E. Gaultier, *Leçons de chronologie et d'histoire*, vol. II, Paris, Jules Renouard, 1827, p. 5-19; Antoine Serieys, *Épitome de l'Histoire de France*, Paris, Samson Fils, 1819, p. 16. The king holding Paris was named the king of France. The practise, resting on the theory of a capital as the heart of the kingdom, is anachronistic. Equating the king of Paris to the king of France was criticized during the Restoration by some historians. See for example Théodose Burette, *Histoire de France*, Tome I, Paris, Chamerot, 1843, p. 87-89.

<sup>24</sup> The full title is *Biographie Universelle et Historique des femmes célèbres mortes ou vivantes qui se sont fait remarquer dans toutes les nations, par leurs vertus, leur génie, leurs écrits, leurs talents pour les sciences et les arts, par leur sensibilité, leur courage, leur héroïsme, leurs malheurs, leurs erreurs, leurs galanteries, leurs vices etc., depuis les commencement du monde jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, Lebigre, 1830.

<sup>25</sup> The writers are identified as *Une société de gens de Lettres, auteurs du dictionnaire universel*. Is it possible that Prudhomme was in fact the writer?

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once were they defined for example as queens of the Franks. The biographies were, besides, much longer than Plancy's biographies.

In Prudhomme's work the concept "queen of France" was used to create a separate category for the wives of the Merovingian rulers in order to distinguish them from other early medieval queens. This was necessary because the multivolume work covered larger geographical area and temporal dimension than the works concentrating only on the history of France. Furthermore, the writer pointed out in the introduction of *Biographie Universelle et Historique des femmes célèbres* that comparison and juxtaposition between French women and women from "other nations" was one of the book's leading ideas<sup>26</sup>. So extending the French monarchy and national history, which here were almost parallel to each other, as far as possible, served the writer's aim to promote the French nation. This was the agenda in several historiographical works, from school books to academic historical discourse, in the 1820's and later.

Fredegonde's biography was two pages long<sup>27</sup>. But those two pages were long enough for Prudhomme to relate how Fredegonde intrigued herself into Chilperic's bed by making him abandon his first wife and getting the second wife assassinated. Then she subjugated her husband and made him "commettre une foule de crimes." She was, according to Prudhomme, accused of killing four men, among them Sigebert, Brunhilde's husband, trying to kill her own daughter, suspected of killing Chilperic and of committing adultery. After the death of Chilperic she, at the head of the army, defeated the army of Childebert II and conquered Paris, and finally died peacefully in her bed. The biography was mainly constructed on occasional anecdotes concerning Fredegonde's possible adultery which took almost half of the whole biography. Prudhomme showed great distrust of medieval sources: he called Aimoin, the French medieval chronicler, "le plus menteur des historiens," and twice he mentioned that Gregory of Tours was Fredegonde's great enemy and therefore not

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<sup>26</sup> Prudhomme, *Biographie Universelle*, *op. cit.*, Tome I, VII.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427-429.

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trustworthy. In other words Prudhomme withdrew from the responsibility of calling Fredegonde a murderer and an adulterer, and put up a mere show of defending her by saying that accusations against her could have been little exaggerated. These words were mere rhetoric, since most readers would probably only remember that she had been accused of murders, adultery and attacking her own daughter.

Fredegonde's biography in Prudhomme's large dictionary varied very little from the earlier work he published in 1791. Almost all the same crimes were mentioned. The only difference between the two short biographies was that the later work mentioned the role played by original sources in creating Fredegonde's image as a "reine maudite," thus making her look a bit less monstrous<sup>28</sup>. If we look back at the short pamphlet *Antoinette d'Autriche* (1789), we see that it had the same elements of Fredegonde. This included adultery<sup>29</sup>, several murders, possibly killing Chilperic and at the end leading an army<sup>30</sup>. In both texts she was pictured as the most powerful and important queen from the Merovingian period primarily due to Chilperic's position as "king of France."

Similarly we see the term "crime" is used to describe several actions of Fredegonde and Chilperic both in the text dating from the end of the eighteenth century and in Prudhomme's later work. In the earlier texts she was described as committing "crimes" against the French people. The idea was rather unique as prior to the revolutionary years the kings were imagined as inviolable. They were the source of law and justice, and their actions could not be construed as a crime<sup>31</sup>. Thus the actions of Chilperic and Fredegonde, even if deemed immoral and sinful, were not

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<sup>28</sup> Only one historian, Francois Eudes de Mézeray, was named in passages concerning Fredegonde in Keralio's work. Keralio, *Les crimes des reines de France*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Adultery was a common accusation to defame queens of the Ancien Régime. See for example Regina Schulte, "The Queen—A Middle-Class Tragedy: The Writing of History and the Creation of Myths in Nineteenth-Century France and Germany," in *Gender & History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2002), p. 270.

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, *Antoinette d'Autriche*, *op. cit.*, p. 9-11.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 35.

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seen as crimes against the French people and they only became such after the change in the king's position found its way to legal codes<sup>32</sup>. The rhetoric of calling certain actions of Fredegonde's "crimes" occurred in many biographical, and academic, works concerning Fredegonde during the early nineteenth century, even though they were unable to specify what laws she had broken. It is not however clear whether the writers indeed saw her as guilty of actual crimes described in legal codes, or whether it was rather a rhetorical device highlighting her negative image. In some cases the word could also refer to "crimes" against nature, or to moral crimes.

The final judgment in all three texts was rather identical as Fredegonde's victory over Childebert's army was seen as a heroic act and thus in her credit. This heroic act of leading an army, primarily a masculine act, made the writers of *Antoinette d'Autriche* conclude that Fredegonde, if her other actions were forgotten, "seroit aujourd'hui le modele des reines, & peut-être des rois."<sup>33</sup> Even though Prudhomme in 1830 did not state it as clearly as the revolutionary propagandist pamphlet, Fredegonde is seen as crossing the distinctive line between both genders, as he made it clear when he described her as a "femme politique" and as subjugating her husband. Both of these actions were perceived as unnatural and even perverse for women, perhaps amounting even to the aforementioned "crimes" against nature. Prudhomme's ideas obviously coincide with a general tendency in the 1830's to encourage women towards a domestic role and to withdraw them from the public sphere, deemed as "masculine".

Seven years passed before the following biography, written by Jules Dubern, was published in 1837<sup>34</sup>. In *Histoire des reines et régentes de France et des favorites des rois*, he dedicated approximately 16 pages to Fredegonde. Like Plancy, he saw her as

<sup>32</sup> However, as early as the seventeenth century, Francois Eudes de Mézeray called Galeswinthe's murder a "crime." See *Abrégé chronologique de l'histoire de France*, Tome I, Amsterdam, Antoine Schelte, 1696, p. 70.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous, *Antoinette d'Autriche, op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> He later changed his name to Du Bern de Boislandry.

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the queen of France as her husband had held Paris under his power, which made him the “king of France.” Dubern, like Prudhomme seven years earlier, was very keen on recalling and emphasising Fredegonde’s “crimes.” Like Prudhomme he highlighted Fredegonde’s power over her husband and depicted her as leading him to numerous criminal acts<sup>35</sup>. According to Dubern, even though many women were highly talented, they could only use their power as a tool for their passions. Dubern claimed it was in the “nature” of women that they were incapable of ruling and using public power<sup>36</sup>. So simultaneously to writing about historical women, Dubern constructed and defined ideal womanhood, an ideal which seemed rather conservative compared with the historiographical and political opportunities women were offered during the last decade of the eighteenth century<sup>37</sup>. He gave Fredegonde credit for having “donné ses soins à l’éducation de son fils et à l’administration de l’état”<sup>38</sup> but made her the archetype of a “bad” female ruler by emphasising her vindictiveness.

The basic idea in Dubern’s study was not, however, to criticise women who used power or took part in politics but to criticise the whole previous regime, the Old Regime. According to the introduction of his work, it seems that he wanted to legitimise the rule of the July Monarchy by conflating all the negative sides of the Old Regime with its queens, especially those who reigned during the early modern period and early medieval period. He wrote in the introduction: “[...] et la France peut contempler aujourd’hui, avec orgueil et confiance, ce trône respecté, où brille d’un si pur éclat l’exemplaire union des vertus conjugales et des vertus civiques.”<sup>39</sup> Considering that the book was published in 1837, the union had to refer to the king of the French, Louis Philippe, and to his queen Maria Amalia. Perhaps Dubern thought that the marriage of the king and queen reflected the value of the government, and

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<sup>35</sup> Jules Dubern, *Histoire des reines et régentes de France et des favorites des rois*, Tome I, Paris, A. Pougin, 1837, p. 24 and 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. i-iv.

<sup>37</sup> Spongberg, *Writing Women’s History*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>38</sup> Dubern, *Histoire des reines*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iv.

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that the less political power the queen had, the better it was for the government<sup>40</sup>. By transforming the early medieval and early modern queens into symbols of all the failures of the Old Regime, he wanted to convince the reader about the superiority of the July Monarchy. He emphasised Fredegonde's power as for him it equalled highlighting the inferiority of the Old Regime. Dubern for example compared Fredegonde with Catherine the Great since according to him both queens came from obscure backgrounds and managed to save their husbands and their armies from imminent danger, after which they both killed their husbands<sup>41</sup>.

There was thus a clear reason in Dubern's work why Fredegonde was pictured as a powerful political figure. It is also noteworthy that Dubern did not detail how he used his sources, which were listed at the end of his work. Neither did he use any sources prior to the early modern period. His interpretation was in fact an interpretation of other interpretations, including that of Dreux du Radier's work, even though it was not listed at the end<sup>42</sup>. In many ways Dubern's work was rather a

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<sup>40</sup> About Louis Philippe's marriage to Maria Amalia, see Jo Burr Margadant, "Gender, Vice, and the Political Imaginary in Postrevolutionary France: Reinterpreting the Failure of the July Monarchy, 1830-1848," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 5 (1999), p. 1467-1468. According to Margadant, Maria Amalia intentionally withdrew from the public sphere and presented herself as a bourgeois lady who wanted nothing to do with politics.

<sup>41</sup> Dubern, *Histoire des reines*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24. We might speculate on the reasons why Dreux du Radier was not included in the list of "auteurs consultés" (p. 343). First, it could be a simple omission on the part of the writer—he may have simply forgotten to include Radier's work in the list. Secondly it must be kept in mind that during this period it was not unheard of to cite a historian without using proper references. See for example how Mathieu Richard Auguste Henrion used François Guizot's ideas without any reference to him, or how Abel Hugo directly quoted from Pierre Denis Peyronnet's work without naming his source. It is very difficult to understand clearly why some historians were named and others were not. See Mathieu Richard Auguste Henrion, *Histoire de France, depuis l'établissement des Franks dans la Gaule jusqu'à nos jours*, Tome I, Paris, Bureau de la Bibliothèque Ecclésiastique, 1837, p. 47; François Guizot, *Essais sur l'histoire de France pour servir de complément aux observations sur l'Histoire de France de l'abbé de Mably*, Paris, Ladrangé, 1836, p. 71; Abel Hugo, *France historique et monumentale: Histoire générale de France depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours*,

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historical novel than the biography of a historical queen, as he did not have to worry about justifying his interpretations—the narrative of a queen behaving like a king was a more seductive story to be told. His work clearly was more attached to earlier historiographical tradition than to the vision that his contemporaries held of the earliest centuries of French monarchy. With the new theories of the so-called 1830's generation, which included historians such as Augustin Thierry and Francois Guizot, the representation of Fredegonde slowly began to take on new meanings.

Philippe le Bas included Fredegonde's biography in his large encyclopaedia of France published in the beginning of the 1840's. Le Bas's encyclopaedias did not concentrate merely on famous women but dealt with topics from all fields of the history of France<sup>43</sup>. Le Bas's interpretation of Fredegonde was quite different from previous biographic texts for several reasons. First of all he did not present her as the queen of France but identified her with the kingdom of Neustria. This identification was important as he stated that "La mort de Galswinthe fit éclater, entre Frédégonde et Brunehaut, une haine qui, se confondant avec la rivalité naissante de la Neustrie et de l'Austrasie, alluma cette guerre civile qui fut si fatale à la puissance mérovingienne."<sup>44</sup> Le Bas drew parallels between the two queens and their kingdoms—they were not mere individuals anymore but represented greater movements of the sixth century. In addition to this, he implied that the two queens were so powerful that their mutual hatred led to the ruin of whole Merovingian dynasty.

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*illustrée et expliquée par les monuments de toutes les époques, édifiés, sculptés, peints, dessinés, coloriés, etc*, Tome II, Paris, Delloye, 1857, p. 67; Pierre Denis Peyronnet, *Histoire des Francs*, Tome I, Bruxelles, J. P. Meline, 1835, p. 103.

<sup>43</sup> Le Bas's encyclopaedia covered fifteen volumes and the one including Fredegonde's biography (Tome 8, FET-GOD), was published in 1842. See the catalogue of the French National Library (accessed on 14 August 2012):

<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/servlet/biblio?idNoeud=1&ID=36580824&SN1=0&SN2=0&host=catalogue>

<sup>44</sup> Le Bas, *L'Univers, op. cit.*, p. 484. A similar idea with slightly different wordings can be found in le Bas's earlier work *Allemagne*, Tome I, Paris, Firmin-Didot, 1838, p. 122.

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Symbolic identification of the queens Fredegonde and Brunhilde to their kingdoms was repeated in several historiographical works during the 1830's and 1840's and it was most likely first presented by Francois Guizot in his *Essais sur l'histoire de France*. According to Guizot, both kingdoms were controlled by Franks but Neustria was stronger in its geographical location and in its Roman traditions favouring powerful government. Austrasia was more Germanic and despite Fredegonde's and Chilperic's strong position in their kingdom, Austrasia's Germanic influence soon dominated the whole area<sup>45</sup>. Le Bas did not make any reference to Guizot in the context of the rivalry, but we may conclude that he knew the theory from other sources or through other historians, as he cited for example Jules Michelet and Augustin Thierry in his chapter on Fredegonde.

Le Bas was not satisfied merely with copying the ideas presented by contemporary historians. If we take a look at one of his sources, Augustin Thierry's *Récits des temps mérovingiens*, we see that there Fredegonde was pictured as the very incarnation of a barbarian and cruel Frank<sup>46</sup>. Le Bas did not present Fredegonde in such a negative way, but on the contrary praised her abilities to govern in Neustria<sup>47</sup>. The writer did not fail to mention all her "crimes" and judged them severely, but clearly he also considered her as a "great leader," as he stated, to conclude: "[...] il suffit de dire, à l'éloge de son administration, qu'Ébroin, qui fut un grand homme, ne fit que l'imiter."<sup>48</sup> The writer thus thought her fit to be compared not only with men, but with Great Men such as Ebroin, the seventh-century Frankish mayor of the palace.

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<sup>45</sup> Guizot, *Essais sur l'histoire de France*, *op. cit.*, p. 71. See also Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, Paris, Hachette, 1835, p. 221. Michelet associated Neustria with Gaul and Austrasia with "Germania", the first one stood for the (Catholic) Church and civilisation, the latter for Barbarism. For a similar interpretation see for instance Abel Hugo, *France historique et monumentale*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>46</sup> See Augustin Thierry, *Récits des temps mérovingien*, Tome II, Paris, Juste Tessier, 1842, p. 379. About Thierry's vision of the Franks, see Lionel Gossman, *Augustin Thierry and Liberal Historiography*, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1976.

<sup>47</sup> Le Bas, *L'Univers*, *op. cit.*, p. 485 and 486.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486.

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Le Bas was rather subtle when referring to Fredegonde's gender and whereas in other texts it was Fredegonde's "perverse" nature that led her to rule over her husband, le Bas highlighted Chilperic's weakness as a husband and as a king. Moreover, Chilperic's own biography focused almost entirely on Fredegonde, which clearly reveals in what light le Bas viewed her role in their marital relation<sup>49</sup>. Even in the pages of historiography Chilperic was subjugated by his wife.

What then according to le Bas made Fredegonde such an important personage despite her vindictiveness and bloodthirsty nature? In le Bas's biography the anecdotes and elements of Fredegonde's story were almost exactly the same as in previous texts but the influence of contemporary historians made him replace the French with Franks and Gallo-Romans. For le Bas, Fredegonde protected Neustria against Germanic Austrasia and against Barbarians. Thus in a sense Neustria, as the western part of Frankish kingdom, was comparable to France even though that was not explicitly stated. As in the previous texts, Fredegonde was also depicted as leading an army herself. But like many of his contemporaries, le Bas did not specify what it meant to govern a state in the early Middle Ages, other than protecting the kingdom with an army and with assassinations.

The new historiographical vision of the early Middle Ages where the French were replaced with the Franks was also noticeable in biographies written by women. Laure Prus, who published her work *Histoire des reines de France: depuis Clotilde, femme de Clovis, premier roi des Francs, jusqu'à nos jours* in London in 1846, is a good example. A Frenchwoman living in London, Prus was mostly known for her travelling books such as *A Residence in Algeria* (1852)<sup>50</sup>. Like le Bas, she no longer depicted Fredegonde as a queen of France but viewed her as the queen of Neustria, while

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<sup>49</sup> Philippe le Bas, *L'Univers. France: dictionnaire encyclopédique*, Tome 5 (CHA-CON), Paris, Firmin Didot frères, 1841, p. 125.

<sup>50</sup> I have chosen to include Prus's work in my article as its image of Fredegonde was highly attached to French historiographical tradition.

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Brunhilde, consequently, was queen of Austrasia. It is interesting however that Brunhilde was only included in her work because she was so important for Fredegonde's history, not because Austrasia would have been a kingdom equal to Neustria in the history of France. According to Prus, Fredegonde was not a queen *of* France, but only a queen *in* France during the late seventh century<sup>51</sup>. Thus similarly to le Bas, she saw Neustria as more French than Austrasia due to Neustria's geographical location. The transition from highlighting Paris to highlighting the geography in defining "France" had thus found its way to the biographical historiographical genre as well.

Prus's biography of Fredegonde is similar, in some features, to Prudhomme's for instance, as when she declares that Gregory of Tours was Fredegonde's mortal enemy, and when she devotes a lot of space to her "crimes". But Prus denied Fredegonde's participation in the murder of Chilperic, for she saw her as too rational to kill the person her power depended on<sup>52</sup>. In Prus's vision Fredegonde was no longer a character driven by her various passions for revenge or for power; indeed her only passion according to Prus was for her children<sup>53</sup>. Whereas at the end of the eighteenth century Fredegonde had been among other things a bad mother, during the nineteenth century her love for her children became one of her good qualities. A possible reason why many historians brought up this positive quality can be found in the highly

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<sup>51</sup> Laure Prus, *Histoire des reines de France: depuis Clotilde, femme de Clovis, premier roi des Francs, jusqu'à nos jours*, Tome I, Londres, Chez l'auteur, 1846, p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> Passion was a negative feature for women in early nineteenth-century historiography. According to Italian historian Michela de Giorgio, passion was a negative feature especially as a base for marriage. Michela De Giorgio, "The Catholic Model," in *A History of Women in the West*, ed. Georges Duby, Michelle Perrot and Geneviève Fraisse, Vol. IV, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 173. For Augustin Thierry two types of negative natures were united in the character of Fredegonde: she was Frankish and a passionate female. According to Gossman, for Thierry passion was the key to dividing historical figures (including men) in two groups, the good ones and the bad ones. See Gossman, *Augustin Thierry, op. cit.*, p. 70.

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popular chronicle of Gregory of Tours where Fredegonde's anguish after her children's death was highlighted<sup>54</sup>. It is not a surprise either that many historians devoted a lot of space to discussing Fredegonde's marriage as it was indeed her marriage that made her famous—a servant girl marrying a king after seducing him and then subjugating him.

It is clear Prus held Fredegonde to be an exceptional figure in the history of France. Prus stated in the introduction of her *Histoire des reines de France* that “Celles qui naissaient seulement avec les qualités de leur sexe, condamnées à l'obscurité, devenaient épouses, mères, et mouraient enfin, sans laisser après elles aucune trace de bien comme de mal.”<sup>55</sup> To be remembered by later generations meant being an extraordinary woman, stepping out of the ideal womanhood which emphasised women's role only as mothers and wives. In order not to disappear in the shadows of history, fall into oblivion, women had to cross the boundaries of gender and in a way, become more masculine—or anti-women. This was exactly how Prus perceived Fredegonde. Her name was not erased by time like so many other names<sup>56</sup>. In fact Prus stated the same thing as so many other writers before her, she only made it more explicit that Great Men were indeed *men*, as women had to adopt masculine values in order to be remembered.

The same year Prus's work was published in London, Adélaïde Celliez (1801-1890) published her *Les Reines de France* in Paris. Celliez came from a noble family and was most probably given a very thorough literate education as her mother was the

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<sup>54</sup> See François Guizot's translation: Grégoire de Tours (538-594), *Histoire des Francs*, Tome I, Paris, J. L. L. Brière, 1823, p. 271-272. See also for example Augustin Thierry's “Nouvelles lettres sur l'histoire de France,” *Revue des deux Mondes*, No. 10 (1841), p. 206-207. Thierry described how Fredegonde had “humane emotions” when her sons suffered and died. In addition to this, concerning Fredegonde's maternal emotions, see for example Jean Marie F. Frantin, *Annales du Moyen Age*, Tome III, Paris, Lagier, 1825, p. 275.

<sup>55</sup> Prus, *Histoire des reines de France*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

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head of a private boarding school<sup>57</sup>. She wrote over sixty pages about Fredegonde and Brunhilde in her work and described their lives in rather great detail. She used a lot of varied sources, and unlike many other biography writers she named the sources in footnotes. Most of her historical narrative about the sixth century followed Gregory of Tours' chronicle. Augustin Thierry's *Récit* was also cited in many occasions. She used Francois Guizot's translation of Gregory of Tours' chronicles, published in the beginning of the 1820's<sup>58</sup>. She also quoted Venantius Fortunatus, a poet contemporaneous to Fredegonde<sup>59</sup>. She had thus in her use rather similar sources as Philippe le Bas and she presented the queens in a similar manner. Thus begins her chapter about Fredegonde and Brunhilde:

Brunhilde et Fredegonde ont rendu célèbre cette époque des fastes mérovingiennes: l'une polie, spirituelle, savante, fille de roi; l'autre sans lettres, d'une naissance obscure; mais belles toutes deux, toutes deux habiles, et toutes deux douées d'un génie qui assura leur empire sur l'esprit de leurs maris, et qui les rendit capables de gouverner.<sup>60</sup>

Celliez juxtaposed in her text two critical social features, education and birth, which were very much linked to one another during the nineteenth century, as higher birth signified better possibilities for education. In addition they were linked to the idea of civilisation, so dearly advocated by Francois Guizot in his *Histoire générale de la civilisation en Europe* (1828) and *Histoire de la civilisation en France* (1830). For a person to be civilised meant to be well-educated, to have "lettres." Fredegonde was represented as lacking in "civilisation" as she had no education and came from an

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<sup>57</sup> Daniel Moulinet, "The Gaume Press. Catholic Books for Young People during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," in *Religion, Children's Literature, and Modernity in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Jan de Maeyer, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2005, p. 450.

<sup>58</sup> Adélaïde Celliez, *Reines de France*, Paris, Lehubry, 1851, p. ii.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23 and 33.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

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ambiguous family of whom no one knew anything. For Celliez and for many of her contemporaries, Fredegonde was opposed to Brunhilde as barbarism was opposed to civilisation. In Celliez's work Fredegonde began to be left in the shadow of Brunhilde who fitted the desires of historians better.

Celliez's work followed the academic historiographical trends; for instance she discussed rather comprehensively the role played by Franks in the history of France. As we have seen, she discussed the case with contemporary historians even though male historians never discussed with female biography writers. Celliez's work and her representation of Fredegonde prove rather conclusively that interaction existed, in a certain measure, between the historiographical genres, even towards the middle of the century. Later on the gap between biographies and academic historiography widened and the genres became more and more gendered, as Bonnie G. Smith has shown in her work *The Gender of History* (1998)<sup>61</sup>.

In the 1840's, at the same time as Celliez's work, several biographies were published about saint queens from the early medieval period<sup>62</sup>. These biographies, focusing on Clotilde among others, stressed the women's feminine virtues such as self-denial, motherhood, obedience and religiosity. According to Spongberg, previously the emphasis in the biographies had been on women with manly qualities, like military prowess, in other words women like Fredegonde<sup>63</sup>. But as the preferences changed towards the middle of the century, Fredegonde started to lose the power she had held in her hands in previous biographies. Even though Celliez reported all the usual elements in her history of Fredegonde—seductions, murders, possible adultery, power over Chilperic, leading an army—she presented her rather as a cruel individual

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<sup>61</sup> Smith, *The Gender of History*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>62</sup> Élisabeth Brun, *Vie de Sainte Bathilde. Reine de France*, Lille, L. Lefort, 1847; Pidoux, Grégoire de Nisse, *Histoire de Sainte Radegonde par Pidoux*, Niort, Pathouot, 1843; Edouard de Fleury, *Histoire de Sainte Radegonde*, Poitiers, H. Oudin, 1843; Caroline Falaize, *Clotilde ou Le Triomphe du Christianisme chez les Francs*, Lille, L. Lefort, 1848; Renaud de Rouvray, *Histoire de Sainte Clotilde, reine de France*, Paris, Société de Saint-Nicolas, 1841.

<sup>63</sup> Spongberg, *Writing Women's History*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

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than as an ingenious leader. According to Celliez, Fredegonde committed all these crimes only in order to satisfy her hatred or ambition<sup>64</sup>. Her masculine qualities had become negative qualities, and the idea of a woman being able to go beyond her gender became more and more remote. In addition, Fredegonde did not seem as “great” as she had in earlier biographies, as she had begun to lose her central position to saint queens who better reflected the ideal of bourgeois womanhood.

Changing biographical ideals are very clearly present in Joséphine Amory de Langerack’s work called *Galerie des femmes célèbres depuis le I<sup>er</sup> siècle de l’ère chrétienne jusqu’au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1847). Langerack was very young when she wrote the collection; according to the introduction to her work, written by Pierre Michel Francois Pitre-Chevalier, she was only eighteen years old<sup>65</sup>. Langerack, like Celliez, wrote other works besides famous women’s biographies<sup>66</sup>. In 1849 Langerack wrote a book entitled *De l’existence morale et physique des femmes ou Essais sur l’éducation et les conditions des femmes, prises dans tous les ordres de la société et en particulier dans les classes laborieuses*<sup>67</sup>, where she examined the position of working-class women in France. She also collaborated in several journals for women. In the 1900 issue of *Bibliographie Française: recueil de catalogues des éditeurs français*, it is said of *Galerie des femmes* that it was “puisé aux véritables et bonnes sources historiques, et doit prendre rang parmi les plus illustres biographies.”<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Celliez, *Reines de France*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Michel Francois Pitre-Chevalier, introduction to *Galerie des femmes célèbres depuis le I<sup>er</sup> siècle de l’ère chrétienne jusqu’au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, by Joséphine Amory de Langerack, Paris, Mellier Frères, 1847, p. vii-xvi.

<sup>66</sup> Adélaïde Celliez, *Du Suicide*, Blois, F. Jahyer, 1838.

<sup>67</sup> Joséphine Amory de Langerack, *De l’existence morale et physique des femmes ou Essais sur l’éducation et les conditions des femmes, prises dans tous les ordres de la société et en particulier dans les classes laborieuses*, Paris, Au Bureau de l’Imprimerie, 1849.

<sup>68</sup> Henri Le Soudier, *Bibliographie française, recueil de catalogues des éditeurs français: accompagné d’une table alphabétique par noms d’auteurs et d’une table systématique*, Tome 8, Paris, H. Le Soudier, 1900, p. 17-18.

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Langerack, like Louis Prudhomme, had not chosen the women for their reputation, since according to its introduction, the work included “un choix de biographies de femmes de toute nature.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, the writer included all sorts of women without trying to “soften” their image<sup>70</sup>. She was thus more conciliating than Plancy had been twenty-seven years earlier in choosing the women to be presented. In addition, Pitre-Chevalier stressed that “immortalising the great men”<sup>71</sup> gave Langerack’s work national value. Such a national aspect was less visible in Plancy’s work, which is explained by the date. In the early 1820’s, national history was not yet so central a theme as it became in the 1840’s.

For Langerack France was above all a Christian nation. For example, at the close of Clotilde’s biography, the author wrote that “La protection divine était donc à nos princes; la première reine de France fut une sainte !”<sup>72</sup> Clotilde’s position as a first queen and as a saint was highlighted by the fact that Langerack envisioned her as living in “Gaul,” which in the author’s historical imagination was tantamount to paganism. Christianity, according to Langerack, can thus be interpreted as single-handedly transforming “Gaul” into the kingdom of France<sup>73</sup>. The concept of “queen of France” was more dimensional for Langerack than for Plancy or for Prudhomme. Langerack did not emphasize Clotilde as a king’s wife but as a religious, Catholic agent and as the initiator of French Christian culture and history. For Langerack, it was no coincidence that the “first queen of France”, Clotilde, was a saint. This was predefined by a (Catholic) God who in Langerack’s work played an active part in history.

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<sup>69</sup> Pitre-Chevalier, “Introduction,” in Langerack, *Galerie des femmes celebres*, *op. cit.*, p. XV.

<sup>70</sup> According to Isabelle Ernot, this feature distinguished Langerack from her contemporary female writers. See Ernot, “Masculin/feminin,” *op. cit.*, p. 78-9.

<sup>71</sup> Pitre-Chevalier, “Introduction,” in Langerack, *Galerie des femmes celebres*, *op. cit.*, p. XI.

<sup>72</sup> Langerack, *Galerie des femmes celebres*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>73</sup> Langerack stated that paganism did not start to disappear before the sixth century, *ibid.*, p. 109.

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God only guided saints, not queens like Brunhilde and Fredegonde. Even though Langerack used expression like “this proud spouse of Neustria’s tyrant”<sup>74</sup> and “this unfaithful spouse”<sup>75</sup> to describe Fredegonde, she also gave her an important role as a “queen of France.” According to Langerack, one can see a fleur-de-lis in her tomb which proved that the flower had symbolised the French throne from the beginning<sup>76</sup>. But the fleur-de-lis was hardly the only reason why Fredegonde was considered as a “queen of France” and Brunhilde was not. Only one queen could hold the title, and as the mother of Clothar II Fredegonde was just as good a choice for Langerack as she had been for Plancy.

Langerack pictured Fredegonde as a Barbarian and about her social class stated that she was born “dans une condition inférieure.”<sup>77</sup> According to the author, Fredegonde, when only a baby, imbibed with the breast milk she was given the “manly force” which later made her a tyrant<sup>78</sup>. In other words, Langerack interpreted Fredegonde’s birth in the light of her later actions and saw her cruelty as resulting from her humble background. The writer drew implicit parallels between gender and social class in Fredegonde’s case as they both were imagined as “natural” and one should not try to exceed their limits<sup>79</sup>. She clearly indicated that surpassing “natural” gender limits would turn a woman to tyranny, cruelty and violence. Social class, however, was a slightly different mechanism of categorisation in historiography, as it

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197. According to French modern historian Colette Beaune, already in the mid-fourteenth century was born a theory of the fleur-de-lis being used during Clovis I’s reign. In reality, only during Charles V’s reign was the symbol added for example to clothes. Originally the fleur-de-lis symbolised the union between faith, Catholic Church and chivalry. Colette Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 317-318. During the French restoration it became a symbol of the past.

<sup>77</sup> Langerack, *Galerie des femmes célèbres*, *op. cit.*, p. 175, 156 and 160.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Langerack in her *De l’existence morale* stressed that women should not wish to leave their “place”—they should stay in the social class they were born in. See for example Langerack, *De l’existence morale*, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

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was used to define both males and females—unlike gender, which in the context of the Merovingian period seemed to be applied only to women. According to historians who wrote about the Merovingian period, surpassing the gender boundaries was a danger only for women, and only their gender was ever referred to. Interestingly Langerack stated that Fredegonde was at the top of her glory just before dying and at this moment, even her humble birth was forgotten<sup>80</sup>. Much as she criticised Fredegonde, at the end she seemed to admire her strength, force and drive—her manly values.

Langerack, like Celliez, used many sources in her biographies but unlike Celliez's, most of those sources were not contemporary. For instance, Langerack made many references to Étienne Pasquier, to Mézeray and to the abbé Velly. Thus in a sense she relied rather on pre-revolutionary historiography whereas Celliez entered in a discussion with the historians of the 1830's generation. The difference was however more essential. Langerack wrote first and foremost to highlight the role played by women in the birth of the French Christian nation, by creating a rather simplistic image of early rulers. Prus was more interested in historical discussion with other historians and attached her representations of early queens to male images of the Merovingian period. In Langerack's work the footnotes and quotations could not hide the fact that it was a collection of moral lessons rather than a collection of historical biographies of famous women.

### **Conclusion**

A similar item in all the biographies written about Fredegonde during the first half of the nineteenth century was the emphasis placed on her gender. When we recall what was written about Fredegonde in 1789, “Frédégonde seroit aujourd’hui le

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<sup>80</sup> Langerack, *Galerie des femmes célèbres*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

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modele des reines, & peut-être des rois,”<sup>81</sup> and compare it to what Langerack wrote in 1847, “Mais ce n’était pas assez pour Frédégonde d’être reine: il lui fallait être reine et roi tout ensemble,”<sup>82</sup> we see how Fredegonde was viewed as crossing the line between feminine queenship and masculine kingship. The central ideas in the quotations are different—the first one emphasises her “crimes” as a leader and presents her masculine behaviour as a positive feature. In the second one, however, the criticism is aimed at her unfeminine ambition and lust for power. It was no longer the monarchy itself which was negative but the queen who did not behave like a good bourgeois queen should have behaved. The same image of Fredegonde subjugating her husband persisted throughout the early nineteenth century as it was used as an example of “unnatural” relations and as a sign of the Merovingian period’s decadence. She was thus perceived in many occasions as a masculine figure but her “greatness” was always attached to the political needs tied to historiography—just as as Clovis’ “greatness” was tied to the rebirth of French monarchy in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Both figures were instruments used by historians to bolster their vision of the “French nation.”

Fredegonde’s role as a queen of France was partly based on second-hand sources written during the Ancien Régime, and as the use of these sources diminished, so did her role in the history of France. In addition, there are several revealing reasons why no one ever wrote any entire work about Fredegonde. First of all she was not perceived as a good role model for female readers and therefore no woman writer would or could write about her. The choice of topics for women authors was very limited—most of them wrote to make a living and it would have been very difficult to get a book about Fredegonde published as it could not have been sold to a bourgeois lady<sup>83</sup>. Saint queens from the Merovingian period, Clotilde, Radegonde and Bathilde,

<sup>81</sup> Anonymous, *Antoinette d’Autriche*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>82</sup> Langerack, *Galerie des femmes célèbres*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>83</sup> According to Spongberg most women only wrote about “good” women. In addition women had to produce texts that were both respectable and profitable. Spongberg, *Writing Women’s History*, *op. cit.*, p. 118-119.

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were more suitable topics for biographies as they functioned as role models—even for queens such as Maria Amelia who identified herself to a bourgeois lady as well<sup>84</sup>. Secondly the reason why there were no works about Fredegonde is that she did not represent the nineteenth-century idea of civilisation, whereas Brunhilde could be depicted as the well-educated patron of religious monuments. Fredegonde was in fact perceived as less “French” and more German than Brunhilde. But as Chilperic’s wife, as a “queen of France,” she could not be ignored, and queenship itself assured her a place among “famous women.” The new historiographical ideas which led to represent Gauls, and Gallo-Romans, as opposing the Franks brought about a slow change in Fredegonde’s role. She no longer represented the early monarchs but the German Franks who were perceived as oppressing the Gauls<sup>85</sup>. Her history was thus a warning example of what might happen to a society if “natural” social classes or gender hierarchies were not respected. Eventually she also came to represent the threat of Germanic influence in France—all in one person.

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<sup>84</sup> Auguste Philibert Chaalons d’Argé, *Marie-Amélie de Bourbon*, Paris, Librairie Centrale, 1868. Interestingly Langerack’s interpretation of Clotilde did not differ very much from a later interpretation made of Marie Amalie, Queen of the French during the July Monarchy. A biography written during the 1860’s depicted her in a way that strongly recalls representations of the saint queen—as a devoted mother and most of all, as completely uninterested in politics.

<sup>85</sup> According to French literature historian Lionel Gossman, gender was often used as a symbol for race: an oppressed woman was associated with the Gauls and an aggressive man with the Franks in Thierry’s work *Récits des temps mérovingien*. Gossman presents the marriages of unfortunate Galeswinthe and saint Radegonde as examples of this interpretation. Of course such associations cannot be applied to all cases, Fredegonde being one exception. She was defined by Thierry right at the beginning as “d’origine franke” which, as we have seen, was in itself a negative feature in Thierry’s eyes (see note 52). See Gossman, *Augustin Thierry, op. cit.*, p. 67-70, and Thierry, *Récits des temps mérovingiens, op. cit.*, p. 379.