

College of Arts, Humanities and Social Science  
School of History, Classics and Archaeology  
Masters Programme Dissertation



**Dissertation Title:**

**Catharina Magaretha Linck or Anastasius  
Lagrantinus Rosenstengel – Transgressions  
of Gender in Early Modern Prussia**

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**Date of Submission:** 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2024

**Programme:** MSc History

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**Word Count:** 14.678

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Dr Kate Davison, my dissertation supervisor, for her invaluable guidance, expertise, and encouragement. Her insightful feedback and advice have been immensely helpful throughout the research and writing of this dissertation and have certainly much improved its final quality. Further, I wish to thank Dr Kerstin Maria Pahl for her constructive suggestions on how to approach my critique of Steidele's *In Männerkleidern* during our coffee meeting in Berlin. Special thanks also to the archivarians at the Secret State Archives Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in Berlin for helping me navigate and find the archival resources necessary for this research. Lastly, a heartfelt thank you to my MSc friends in Edinburgh, especially Abby, James and Declan, for their companionship, stimulating discussions and insight. I would have not been able to complete this dissertation without their support, our group study sessions and coffee breaks – Thank you!

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## 1 Introduction

In 1891, Dr Carl Franz Müller (1860-1913) published an article containing the partial transcription of court documents detailing the 1721 trial of Catharina Magaretha Linck, or Anastasius Lagratinus Rosenstengel as they called themselves – the last person to be executed for sodomy with woman in Prussia.<sup>1</sup> The surviving trial records provide incredible insights into life and struggles of Rosenstengel leading up to the trial.<sup>2</sup>

Born in 1687 in Gehofen (today in Thuringia), Rosenstengel (assigned female at birth) lived a life marked by continuous struggle and adaptation.<sup>3</sup> In their early adolescence, after a short stint as a textile apprentice, they travelled to Cable – reportedly for the first presenting as a man. Soon after, they joined a radical Pietist Baptist sect, traveling from Halle via Upper Lusatia to Nuremberg, during which they were baptised under their new chosen name, Anastasius Lagratinus Rosenstengel.<sup>4</sup> While with the group, Rosenstengel acted as a prophet, who could directly communicate with God, but after increasing internal disagreements and conflicts, they returned to Halle and their previous life as Catharina Linck. Unsatisfied with their life in Halle, Rosenstengel soon left again, joining the army as a man, and serving in various military campaigns between 1705 and 1711. After ending their military service, Rosenstengel settled back in Halle when they found employment as a university clothier. For three years, Rosenstengel lived a quiet life wearing both women's and men's clothing, which

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Carl Franz Müller, "Ein weiterer Fall conträrer Sexualempfindung," in *Friedreich's Blatt für gerichtliche Medicin und Sanitätspolizei* (Nürnberg: Verlag der Fridrich Korn'sch Buchhandlung, 1891). Müller specifically transcribed the criminal collegium's expert report without historical-critical analysis or noting any omissions. I use gender-neutral pronouns "they/them" and Rosenstengel to honour their chosen name and highlight the inadequacy of the gender binary in capturing Rosenstengel's gender non-conformity. This approach acknowledges how gendered language shapes our historical understanding, avoids assumptions about their identity, and prevents a reductive reading of their varied gender expressions. Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (New York: Seal Press, 2022), 28; Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 14, 265.

<sup>2</sup> "A[ct]a betr. Catharina, Margaretha Ljynckern oder der sogen. Anastasius Lagratinus Rosenstengel und dessen vermeintes Eheweib Cathar[ina] Margar[aretha] Mühlhahnen. 1721 Okt[ober] 13." Sig. I. HA Geheimer Rat, Rep. 33 Fürstentum Halberstadt, Nr. 62, 1715-1721 sowie 1722-1724. [Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin]. For this dissertation, I primarily rely on the transcription provided by Steidele.

The original documents inscribed on both sides and involved at least ten different typesets by various scribes. While the original arrangement prioritized the most important matters first, Steidele's transcription present the content in a chronological order. Angela Steidele, *In Männerkleidern: Das verwegene Leben der Catharina Margaretha Linck alias Anastasius Lagratinus Rosenstengel, hingerichtet 1721. Biographie und Dokumentation*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2021), 209-93.

<sup>3</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 13.

<sup>4</sup> German Pietism, emerging in the late seventeenth century within Reformed and Lutheran Protestantism, was both a religious and social movement. It emphasized personal spiritual renewal, small group Bible study, practical Christianity, social activism, and millennialism, introducing a transformative paradigm to German Protestantism. Douglas H. Shantz, "Introduction," in *A Companion to German Pietism, 1660-1800*, ed. Douglas H. Shantz (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

was seemingly tolerated by the municipal community, until a military recruitment squad arrested them, leading to a forced sex examination and expulsion from the city. A year later, now employed by a stocking maker in Halberstadt, Rosenstengel met and married Catharina Margaretha Mühlhahn (1798-1776).<sup>5</sup> However, soon after the marriage, Pastor Israel Clauder (1670-1721) received a letter from August Herman Francke (1663-1727) revealing Rosenstengel's gender transgression, and though Clauder did not report Rosenstengel to the authorities, he confronted them, forcing the couple to flee Halberstadt.<sup>6</sup> Struggling to find work, the couple travelled from town to town. They found temporary refuge in monasteries, even agreeing to being baptised again and catholicly marrying a second time to receive a small dowry, food, and shelter. Despite all their struggles, Mühlhahn chose to stay with her spouse until their dire financial situation forced the couple to separate. Rosenstengel returned to Halberstadt in May 1720 to reunite with their wife, however, upon arrival their mother-in-law, Catharina Magaretha Eichsfelder (1681-?) – who had long wished her daughter to divorce Rosenstengel and been suspicious of their gender presentation – confronted Rosenstengel to prevent the couple's reunion. Together with her neighbour, she overpowered Rosenstengel and forcibly inspected their genitals. Upon discovering their leather dildo, Eichsfelder reported Rosenstengel to the authorities, setting in motion the inquisition trial at municipal court. The court deliberated three main charges: deception by living as a man, repeated baptisms across different congregations, and, most notably, sodomy with their wife using a leather dildo. Jurists debated the criminal nature of female sodomy, questioning whether the death penalty was appropriate since no "fleshy union" had occurred. However, Frederick William I (1688-1740) ultimately decided that Rosenstengel be executed by beheading and their body buried in unconsecrated ground, while Mühlhahn was sentenced to three years of imprisonment and banished from the country. The trial marked the tragic culmination of Rosenstengel's struggle to live as a man in a society that rigidly enforced gender norms.

As a medical professional contributing to the emerging field of sexology, Müller had found the case during his search for "contrasexuls" among the criminal court files at the Prussian Secret State Archives in Berlin for a "bigger work about sodomy."<sup>7</sup> With the article's

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<sup>5</sup> I refer to Mühlhahn by her last name to avoid confusion since her first names are the same as Rosenstengel's birth name. However, I acknowledge that this linguistically annuls her marriage to Rosenstengel and repeats the discrimination the married couple endured during the trial.

<sup>6</sup> Francke was a Lutheran clergyman, biblical scholar and philanthropist, who is remembered as a leading figure of "Halle Pietism". In Glaucha, he founded an orphanage and school that Rosenstengel attended until age 14. Benjamin Marschke, "Pietism and Politics in Prussia and Beyond," in *A Companion to German Pietism, 1660-1800*, ed. Douglas H. Shantz, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 492.

<sup>7</sup> Müller's larger work was never published; Müller, "Sexualempfindung," 300.; For easier readability, I have translated all German quotes into English for this dissertation.

title, Müller references an influential article by psychiatrist Carl Westphal's (1833-1890) that pathologizes same-sex love and desire, diagnosing it as a "congenital reversal of sexual sensation."<sup>8</sup> Following Westphal's medical theory, Müller diagnosed Rosenstengel as "abnormally inclined/predisposed," suffering from "sexual perversity" on the basis that "she seems to have been missed every purely female sexual feeling."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, he rejected the idea that "contrasexuals" are "idiotic" and instead uses Rosenstengel's case to argue that homosexuality ought to be treated as a mental illness, not a criminal offence.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, Müller's argumentation merely shifts the responsibility along with the discrimination and persecution of homosexual individuals from judicial to medical authorities.<sup>11</sup> As the first analysis of Rosenstengel's case, Müller's article is illustrative of the shift of perceiving homosexuality as a sinful act to a psychological disposition that defined a particular type of person.<sup>12</sup> Further, his diagnosis reflects what Judith Butler has termed the "heterosexual matrix" - idea that sex, gender, and sexuality are inherently connected under a binary heterosexual logic, presuming that for someone to experience same-sex desire, they had to invert their gender identification.<sup>13</sup> The pathologizing framework of early Western sexologists presaged the rise of sexual identities in the twentieth century and influenced the scholarship of early queer historians, who frequently adapted their medical terminology.<sup>14</sup>

Ninety years later, Brigitte Eriksson rediscovered Müller's article and republished an English translation without his commentary, which introduced the case as an "account of the lives of two women" framing Rosenstengel's case as lesbian history.<sup>15</sup> Alongside Eriksson's transcription, Luis Crompton provided a historical interpretation of the case that built a chronology of lesbian criminalisation in early modern Europe to refute the claim that historically queer women – in contrast to queer men - did not experience judicial prosecution.<sup>16</sup> As such, Crompton's article followed the trend amongst historians of homosexuality to construct linear histories often to progress their own political goals emerging as part of the gay

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<sup>8</sup> Carl Westphal, "Die conträre Sexualempfindung, Symptom eines neuropathischen (psychopathischen) Zustandes," *Archiv für Psychiatrie* 2 (1870): 73.

<sup>9</sup> Müller, "Sexualempfindung," 289, 99.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 300.

<sup>11</sup> Steidle, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 172.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, "The Invention of Sexuality," in *Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed., Thinking gender, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> C Libby, "The Historian and the Sexologist: Revisiting the "Transvestite Saint"," *TSQ* 8, no. 2 (2021): 172.

<sup>15</sup> Brigitte Eriksson, "A Lesbian Execution in Germany, 1721," *Journal of Homosexuality* 6, no. 1-2 (1981): 28.

<sup>16</sup> Louis Crompton, "The Myth of Lesbian Impunity Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791," *Journal of homosexuality* 6, no. 1-2 (1981).

rights movement.<sup>17</sup> Continuing Crompton's investigation of Rosenstengel's trial as lesbian criminalisation, Lillian Faderman and Suanne Kord shifted their attention to how gender-transgression influenced early modern lesbian prosecution, arguing that Rosenstengel's execution was less driven by their sexual practices and more by their assumption of male privileges and freedoms.<sup>18</sup> Part of a first reactionary interest in gender ambiguity and sexuality, their work reads Rosenstengel through a gender and feminist lenses – viewing gender transgression through patriarchal struggle and women's oppression. Their "passing women" framework paid little attention to potential trans subjectivity typical for the scholarship on early modern female-to-male (FTM) cross-dressing at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

Until 2004, Rosenstengel's case continued to be discussed only as a case study within larger historical work, in part due to the limited source material provided by Müller. However, this changed when the German scholar Angela Steidele discovered Rosenstengel's story while researching for her PhD in Literary Studies at the University Siegen.<sup>20</sup> Her dissertation investigated the literary portrait of romantic relationships between women in German literature to analyse narrative structures and textual strategies in light of the contemporary understanding of, and discourse on, female sexuality and traced its historical development.<sup>21</sup> Specifically building on the Faderman's and Kord's discussion, she too first used Rosenstengel as a case example of "the last woman in Europe to die for same-sex acts" in her historical overview of the eighteenth to nineteenth century judicial regulations.<sup>22</sup>

However following her dissertation, she continued to investigate Rosenstengel's history and was the first to return to the Prussian Secret State Archives, where she discovered that the file had survived the Second World War and had not been opened since Müller's investigation.<sup>23</sup> The culmination of this discovery was the first and currently only biography of

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<sup>17</sup> Laura L. Doan, "Introduction: History and Sexuality/Sexuality and History," in *Disturbing Practices : History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Lillian Faderman, "Transvestism: Persecution and Impunity," in *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981), 52; Susanne T. Kord, "Eternal Love or Sentimental Discourse? Gender Dissonance and Women's Passionate „Friendships“," in *Outing Goethe & His Age*, ed. Alice A. Kuzniar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 229.

<sup>19</sup> Emily Skidmore, "Recovering a Gender-Transgressive Past: A Transgender Historiography," in *A Companion to American Women's History* ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Anne M. Valk (Newark: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2021), 212.

<sup>20</sup> Angela Steidele (\*1869) is an author best known today for her scientifically researched literary works with a focus biographical writing about gay and lesbian history. "Angela Steidele," Literaturreport, updated 29.05.2024, <https://www.literaturport.de/lexikon/angela-steidele/>.

<sup>21</sup> Angela Steidele, "'Als wenn Du mein Geliebter wärest.'" Liebe und Begehren zwischen Frauen in der deutschsprachigen Literatur 1750-1850" (PhD Universität Siegen, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 171.

Rosenstengel: *In Männerkleidern*, which provided the first detailed chronological account of their life, focusing on their subjectivity beyond the trial, and greatly expanding on the previous source material.<sup>24</sup> Building on the previous scholarship, Steidele initially approaches Rosenstengel through the lens of lesbian history and a cross-dressing framework. Though mostly following a biographical approach, her work ends with an exploration of how Rosenstengel might be interpreted in modern terms, asking whether they should be interpreted as trans or lesbian. For this concluding interpretation, Steidele engages with Michal Foucault, Judith Butler, and Thomas Laqueur, whose theories on the historical and cultural specificity of sexuality, gender, and sex inform her portrayal of Rosenstengel as a “lesbian desiring woman.”<sup>25</sup> Stating that as a lesbian herself she is personally interested in writing the histories of “exceptional women” who loved other women to learn more about her “own history.”<sup>26</sup> *In Männerkleidern* was part of a wave of lesbian scholarship that emerged from the 1990s in response to concerns that lesbian history had been neglected, especially in Germany.<sup>27</sup> Notably, in the revised 2021 edition of *In Männerkleidern*, while much of the biographical narrative and theory remains unchanged, Steidele subtly shifts her argument - no longer clearly reading Rosenstengel as lesbian - in response to the rise of early modern trans studies in the 2010s, which challenged her previous cross-dressing interpretation.<sup>28</sup>

Trans studies had emerged in the 1980s alongside gender and sexuality studies, driven by growing transgender activism against pathologization and exclusion by the gay, lesbian, and feminist movements.<sup>29</sup> The field took off in the 1990s which saw the rise of new ways to think about transgender experiences, including Butler’s theory of gender performativity.<sup>30</sup> Despite

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<sup>24</sup> Angela Steidele, *In Männerkleidern: Das verwegene Leben der Catharina Margaretha Linck alias Anastasius Lagrantinus Rosenstengel, hingerichtet 1721. Biographie und Dokumentation*, 1st ed. (Köln: Bühlau-Verlag GmbH, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2004), 37. These three theories and Steidele’s engagement with them in her argumentation are discussed in more detail in chapter 3. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, ed. Robert Hurley, Will to knowledge, (London: Penguin, 1979); Butler, *Gender*; Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Angela Steidele, *Poetik der Biographie*, Fröhliche Wissenschaft, (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2019), 29.

<sup>27</sup> Kord, "Eternal," 228.

<sup>28</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 174, footnote 14.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Stryker broadly defines the trans studies as “concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood.” Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges - An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 1; According to Butler, gender is not an essence or attribute but “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of

the emerging scholarly discourse, the legitimacy of contemporary trans identities continued to be questioned pointing to the recent origins of ‘trans’ terminology.<sup>31</sup> In response, the trans community sought to find its historical ancestry, mirroring earlier efforts by the gay and lesbian communities.<sup>32</sup> The initial search pioneered by activists like Leslie Feinberg faced criticism for being ahistorical by applying modern terms to historical subjects.<sup>33</sup> Particularly early modern historians criticised this initial search for apply modern terms to historical subjects and initially hesitated to adopt trans historical frameworks and continued to rely on cross-dressing frame works that avoided the question of gender subjectivity.<sup>34</sup> It was only in the 2010s that early modern trans studies really began to gain traction, both in response to the trans topic’s rise into the cultural limelight, as the US Supreme court’s 2015 decision to legalise same-sex marriage transformed trans rights into the new civil rights frontier for the LGBTQ+ community, and because “different methods for excavating pasts that certainly contained gender-variant cultural practices, without necessarily imposing the name ‘transgender’ on historical moments” had emerged.<sup>35</sup> As the decade progressed more interdisciplinary approaches reached early modern trans studies demonstrating the fields potential in transforming how we interpret both the past and present.<sup>36</sup>

Although Steidele acknowledges and briefly engages with trans historical scholarship, her work remains flawed in its application of modern gender and sexual identities to an era in which such understandings had yet to come into existence. While her identity approach – born out of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in the 1970s – continues to have political and academic

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substance, of a natural form of being.” With their theory, Butler deconstructed the assumed naturalness of the sex/gender relationship. Instead of sex as an “interior ‘truth’” to gender, it is the discursive and cultural means by which sex is produced – a set of power relations resulting in the illusion that sex is both natural and binary. Butler, *Gender*, 45f.

<sup>31</sup> In 1910, German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term "transvestite" to describe individuals who lived in a different gender than they were assigned at birth. Later, in the mid-twentieth century, the term “transsexual” emerged to describe trans people who accessed medical transitions, popularized by Dr. Harry Benjamin. In the late 1960s, American trans activist Virginia Prince helped popularize “transgender” for those who transitioned socially but not medically, which later in the 21st century, especially after Feinberg’s 1992 "Transgender Liberation," transformed into the umbrella term. Heyam, *Before*, 10f. I understand transgender as refereeing to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth” following the expansive and non-identitarian notion pioneered by Stryker. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Skidmore, "Recovering," 212.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 213; Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*, LGBT Thought and Culture, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Simone Chess, Colby Gordon, and Will Fisher, "Introduction: Early Modern Trans Studies," *Journal for early modern cultural studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 2f.

<sup>35</sup> Simone Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern Literature : Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 179; Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, "Introduction: Transgender Studies 2.0," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 11.

<sup>36</sup> Chess, Gordon, and Fisher, "Introduction."

value, I argue that it lacks the flexibility and nuance necessary for studying the early modern.<sup>37</sup> This dissertation aims to provide a scholarly understanding of Steidele's work on Rosenstengel, specifically her biographical approach and interpretation in the second edition of *In Männerkleidern*, asking what it reveals about the challenges and possibilities historians face when narrating the history of early modern gender non-conforming individuals. By critiquing Steidele's reliance on modern identity frameworks and putting her work into dialogue with early modern trans scholarship, the study emphasises the need for a more nuanced trans-informed approach to the history of early modern gender-non-conforming historical subjects, such as Rosenstengel.

To do so, I deploy a trans historical methodology that moves beyond Steidele's previously widespread identity approach, and advocates instead to embraces ambiguity, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how historical subjects like Rosenstengel navigated and expressed their gender situated within their specific historical context. I utilise Clear Sears's concept of "transing" gender, that uses "trans" as an action verb to make sense of a subject's gender transgression by focussing on their *doing* rather than *being*.<sup>38</sup> This approach denotes a way of engaging with a historical subject that pays attention to the many ways they challenged, redefined, and negotiated gender without assuming a complete understanding of a historical figure's action or imposing any fixed identity upon them.<sup>39</sup> Using trans as a verb refocuses our attention to how individuals interact with societal norms and values, rather than on some internal essence of gender. The concept of "doing gender" highlights that everyone, regardless of whether they conform to their assigned gender at birth, must continually perform and reinforce their gender through their actions, which are retrospectively interpreted as the expression of masculine and feminine 'natures,' to maintain their social status and thus avoids excluding or pathologizing those who trans their gender. Gender, as a powerful yet unstable sociocultural construct, shapes individual choices and sustains social structures, with its conceptions varying throughout history and across cultures.<sup>40</sup> Instead of viewing Rosenstengel as simply shifting between two fixed binaries, I consider them as having a continuously developing and mutable relationship with gender.

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<sup>37</sup> Doan, "Introduction," 17f.

<sup>38</sup> Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-century San Francisco*, Perverse modernities, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>40</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," in *Doing Gender Diversity: Readings in Theory and Real-World Experience*, ed. Rebecca F. Plante and Lis M. Maurer (New York: Routledge, 2018), 10; Ulinka Rublack, "Meanings of Gender in Early Modern German History," in *Gender in Early Modern German History*, ed. Ulinka Rublack, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

Furthermore, I adopt the concept of “relational gender,” which adapts Butler's theory of gender performativity into sociological praxis and has been used by Simon Chess in her exploration of FTM cross-dressing in early modern literature.<sup>41</sup> In Jocelyn Downie and Jennifer J. Llewellyn words: “The human self in this view is constituted *in and through* relationship with others. We define ourselves *in* relationship to others and *through* relationship with others.”<sup>42</sup> Empathising the gender relationality challenges the assumption that “transing” gender would be solely met with punishment and correction, and instead highlights how normative and alternative expressions of gender and sexuality are negotiated within relationships.<sup>43</sup> Rosenstengel’s transing of gender impacts not just themselves but also those around them, leading to what Susan Stryker calls “transgender effects,” which illuminate the production of gender normativity in new and insightful ways.<sup>44</sup> This methodological framework will guide the analysis throughout the dissertation, beginning with the critique of the Steidele’s biographical writing and structuring of *In Männerkleidern*, followed by an examination of her novel *Rosenstengel*, and concluding with evaluation of Steidele’s interpretation of Rosenstengel in the biography’s concluding chapter.<sup>45</sup> The final goal is to propose an alternative approach to analysing and narrating Rosenstengel’s history that specifically highlights how gender, sex and sexuality were conceived and negotiated by Rosenstengel and their contemporaries.

## 2 (Re)constructing Rosenstengel’s Biography

In trying to critically analyse *In Männerkleidern*, it is not enough to study the source material, we must also understand the biographer and her approach. As Steidele notes, “The person of the biographer thus determines a biography at least as much as the biographed.”<sup>46</sup> Steidele divides her work into a biography section, chronologically retelling Rosenstengel’s life, a final interpretative chapter, and finally a historically annotated transcription of the main sources along with a short critical introduction.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, this structural separation gives the illusion that the biographical section is neutral and historical, despite being inflected by her

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West, *Doing Gender, Doing Difference Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Chess, *MTF Crossdressing*, 2, 9..

<sup>42</sup> Jocelyn Downie and Jennifer J. Llewellyn, "Introduction," in *Being Relational: Reflections on Relational Theory and Health Law* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>43</sup> Chess, *MTF Crossdressing*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Stryker, "(De)Subjugated," 13.

<sup>45</sup> Angela Steidele, *Rosenstengel: Ein Manuskript aus dem Umfeld Ludwigs II.* (München: btb Verlag, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Steidele, *Poetik*, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Notably, the smaller sources, such as church register entries are quoted in full in the biographical section. Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 211.

own historical constructionism, thus seemingly contradicting her statement that the biographer is just as important.

Particularly, Steidele's linguistic choices reveal how her interpretation permeates the whole narration. Confronted with the question of what name and pronouns to use for a gender-nonconforming historical figure, Steidele first opted to use female pronouns and Rosenstengel's birth name Catharina Linck.<sup>48</sup> For the second edition, to avoid a premature linguistic decision about their identity, Steidele shifted to referring to them as Linck when perceived as a woman and Rosenstengel when seen as a man.<sup>49</sup> With this change Steidele response to the increasing public attention placed on the general topic of transgender, acknowledging that "Although as a lesbian I see the lesbian in her, linguistically I have taken more account of the fact that trans people legitimately recognise a trans person here."<sup>50</sup> While Kelly Swartz suggests that using different gendered pronouns for the same person acknowledges how others perceived them "recogniz[ing] the importance of social positioning to gender," I see significant issues with this approach.<sup>51</sup> Over the last decades, trans scholarship and activism has underscored how the strategic deployment of gendered language shapes out perception of (historical) individuals and communities.<sup>52</sup> By switching back and forth between "he" and "she" Steidele linguistically confines Rosenstengel in the gender-binary that they disrupted, thus reinforcing the "passing framework," an analytical method popular in the 1990s which focussed on whether historical figures successfully 'passed' in social, romantic, and erotic contexts. In mobilising this framework, Steidele fails to adequately address the fluidity of Rosenstengel's gender and how they negotiated it according to their environment.<sup>53</sup> While I acknowledge the relationality of gender, focusing solely on how Rosenstengel's environment perceived them risks stripping them of agency. Ignoring Rosenstengel's personal choice to continually trans their gender replicates the violence and discrimination they endured in life. Crucially, they identified as a woman only when social circumstances forced them to. It is well

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<sup>48</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2004).

<sup>49</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 49. German lacks gender-neutral pronouns, but Steidele could have opted for neo-pronouns like "en/ens/em/en" or used "she/he" to emphasize Rosenstengel's gender nonconformity. "Pronomen," Verein für Geschlechtsneutrales Deutsch e.V., <https://geschlechtsneutral.net/pronomen/>.

<sup>50</sup> Angela Steidele, "Wurde vor 300 Jahren eine Lesbe hingerichtet oder ein trans Mann?," interview by Erwin in het Panhuis, 2021, [https://www.queer.de/detail.php?article\\_id=40408](https://www.queer.de/detail.php?article_id=40408).

<sup>51</sup> Kelly Swartz, "Enlightenment Literature as Trans Literature," in *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp (New York: Routledge, 2024), 468.

<sup>52</sup> Manion, *Female*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Skidmore, "Recovering," 212; Chess, *MTF Crossdressing*, 18.

to remember that gender conformity was in itself a punishment for daring to trans one's gender.<sup>54</sup>

Steidele's approach to the sources is largely what Anjali Arondekar terms "extractive," meaning that the sources function as 'a source of information' to reconstruct Rosenstengel's life, paying little attention to the context of their creation and their inherent violence.<sup>55</sup> The main source for Steidele's biography is the surviving file on Rosenstengel's court case, which only documents its final phase: the sovereign's review of the verdict recommendation given by Law Faculty at the University of Duisburg. What occurred during the trial before emerges only indirectly from the sources, since the inquisition records are unfortunately lost, including interrogation records, witness statements, medical reports, and subsequent legal petitions.<sup>56</sup> The two other major sources are the court file from 1722 following the petition for clemency for Mühlhahn send to the king by her mother that illuminates Mühlhahn's role and her 'guild' once again in greater detail and an anonymous print titled "A circumstantial and truthful description of a land and people deceiver" published in September 1720 that retells Rosenstengel's life focusing on their role as a radical pietist and their alleged "fraud and malice."<sup>57</sup> By meticulously comparing the facts across all sources to substantiate Rosenstengel's statements and the sources' overall reliability, Steidele constructed a coherent narrative, offering historical context and anecdotes while keeping the interpretation minimal to provide an "objective" and "factual" historical account of Rosenstengel's life.<sup>58</sup> Only in the final chapters - covering the inquisition, the anonymous print, and the final judgment process - offer some insight into how the trial was conducted, how and why Rosenstengel's life became instrumentalised, and who made the final decisions that led to their execution.<sup>59</sup> By focusing on what the sources tell us for chronology, Steidele neglects to critically situate the sources - the power dynamics and context that shaped their creation and contents - throughout the biography.

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<sup>54</sup> Manion, *Female*, 95, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Anjali Arondekar, "Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2 (2005): 15.

<sup>56</sup> "A[ct]ja," Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62; Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 213.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*; *Umständliche Und Wahrhaffte Beschreibung Einer Land- Und Leute-Betrügerin: Welche Im 12ten Jahre Ihres Alters Unter Die So Genannten Inspiraten Gerathen, Und in Manns-Kleidern Mit Ihnen Herum Vagiret, Sich Etliche Mahl Tauffen, Auch Als Eine Manns- Mit Einer Weibs-Person Trauen Lassen ... Endlich Aber Von Dem Ihr Anvertrauten Weibsbild Verrathen, Folglich Im 27ten Jahr Ihres Alters in Diesem 1720ten Jahr in Arrest Genommen, Und Gegen Sie Mit Der Inquisition Verfahren, Auch Dadurch Ihr Vielfältiger Betrug Und Boßheiten Entdeckt Worden*. Halle (Saale): Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt, 2009, 1720.

<sup>58</sup> Steidele, *Poetik*, 69.

<sup>59</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 113-60.

Steidele imagines herself in “the role of the addressee, who tracks down, collects, organises and chronologises the texts left behind,” as if even the most intimate details had been personally addressed to her. She describes her relationship with the biographed as that of “production pair that conducts a phase-shifted dialogue, a correspondence,” who “write a biography together.” Within this framework, all surviving sources are “understood as a message to posterity” by the biographed.<sup>60</sup>

While painting a compelling collaborative image of biographical writing, the sources are not messages left behind by Rosenstengel for historians to be discovered and are far from neutral. The trial was a life-or-death situation for Rosenstengel. The story they told to prosecutors was given with the knowledge that it would influence their final verdict and could help save them from execution.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Rosenstengel’s and Mühlhahn’s statements frequently contradicted each other. For instance, while Mühlhahn maintained that she did not enjoy the sex as her body hurt afterwards, insinuating that her body naturally rejected this “sinful “and “unnatural” act, Rosenstengel maintained that they never hurt their wife, and that Mühlhahn actively enjoyed their intimacy. Their statements demonstrate how both Rosenstengel and Mühlhahn were framing their stories in ways they thought would maximise their chance of survival. Particularly, Mühlhahn tried to convince the court that she was unaware of Rosenstengel’s ‘true’ gender and thus a victim of their deception. Although the court did not believe her claim of innocence, with her strategy Mühlhahn ultimately availed being executed alongside Rosenstengel.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, the trial records are not first-hand accounts from Rosenstengel but were written by male authorities whose main goal was to propose an appropriate judgement for Rosenstengel and their wife, using their inquisition statements as evidence to support their decision. So, even if Rosenstengel truthfully recounted their past experiences, we cannot rely on the sources to have recorded their voice accurately. Steidele herself acknowledges this, noting that for example, the records wrongfully describe Rosenstengel as younger than 27 although they had clearly been much older.<sup>63</sup> An alternative approach to uncovering ‘the truth’ for such documents, proposed by Mary Lindemann, is to ask how figures such as Rosenstengel composed their life narrative into a coherent story that was believable for their contemporaries. By recounting their life as a coherent narrative during the trial, using available explanations

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<sup>60</sup> Steidele, *Poetik*, 48-51.

<sup>61</sup> Heyam, *Before*, 15.

<sup>62</sup> “A[ct]a,” Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*; Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 213.

and ideas, they likely for the first time made sense of their own identity and social life in a chronological manner. Following this framework, regarding these documents as a historical account situated within a specific social context can help us understand the social, cultural, and political worlds of the narrators.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, Steidele's approach to the sources would benefit from a conscious acknowledgement of the multiple layers of narration within the context of their creation and the questions that shaped each of them (see Figure 1). Although Rosenstengel sits at the centre, the 'real' Rosenstengel remains largely obscured. As Arondekar argues we need to depart from the idea that uncovering something in the archive will inevitably lead to "a formulation of subjectivity," challenging the assumption that in writing history we can recover a person.<sup>65</sup> Particularly, the publication of the anonymous print reveals that Rosenstengel was entirely defenceless against instrumentalization and publication of intimate details of their life.<sup>66</sup> The anonymous print defames Rosenstengel as a radical pietist alleging that their "fraud and malice" as the symptom of an increasing evil world caused by such "godless sects."<sup>67</sup> Thus, the religiously motivated author(s) falsified, mocked, and used Rosenstengel's fate for their own political ends, playing into the reoccurring transphobic motive of gender-nonconformity as a tell-tale sign of untrustworthiness and even criminality.

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<sup>64</sup> Mary Lindemann, "Gender tales: the multiple identities of Maiden Heinrich, Hamburg 1700," in *Gender in Early Modern German History*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 134-6.

<sup>65</sup> Arondekar, "Without," 21.

<sup>66</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 127, 33.

<sup>67</sup> *Umständliche Und Wahrhaffte Beschreibung*, 1720.

## Visualising the Layers of Narration

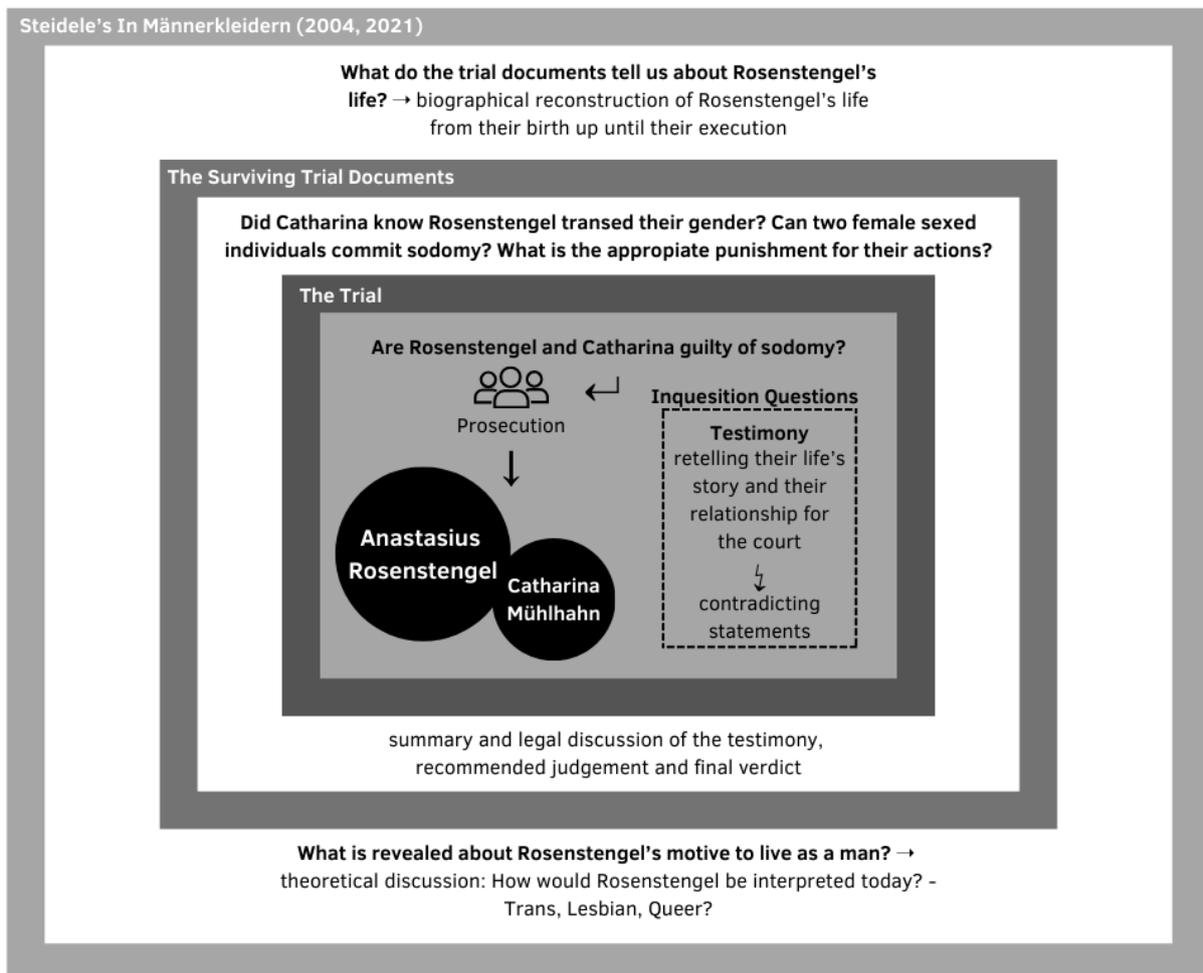


Figure 1

Any source, shaped by its purpose and the power dynamics at play during its creation, inevitably contains gaps and silences. However, Steidele neglects to highlight and interrogate biases and silences shaping the historical account of Rosenstengel's life that she reconstructs. As Greta LaFleur and her colleagues emphasize, understanding these silences is crucial, particularly in trans studies, where they profoundly shape the field's historical narratives.<sup>68</sup> Particularly, when assessing Rosenstengel's relationship with their wife, it is essential to attend to what the sources do not tell us. Although their relationship is central to the trial, the sources give a far from comprehensive picture. The trial records include detailed testimony on the Rosenstengels' marriage. However, while sex, particularly Rosenstengel's use of a leather

<sup>68</sup> Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska, "Introduction: The Benefits of Being Trans Historical," in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 2.

dildo, are a central focus in the judicial discussions, we do not actually learn that much their relationship.<sup>69</sup> Based on the trial records, Steidele describes their marriage as an unhappy one characterised by financial problems that even resulted in domestic violence by Rosenstengel.<sup>70</sup> Contrary to this assessment, it can be noted that despite their personal and financial struggles, Mühlhahn rejected her mother's requests to divorce Rosenstengel and fled with them after their confrontation with Clauder. Thus, while the sources give us a rough idea about how the years of marriage went down, we learn very little about their relationship dynamic or their intimacy.<sup>71</sup> As Valerie Traub has highlighted, historians need to closely examine even most obvious categories of relations, such as sex acts, because of the "inherent unknowability of sex" in its epistemological, ontological, and semantic dimensions, since historical sources on sex resists clear understanding and interpretation.<sup>72</sup> For instance, the trial records highlight a curious detail about their wedding night, where Rosenstengel allegedly claimed they would have sex twenty-four times but managed only three or four times.<sup>73</sup> Steidele mentions this detail, however, without further analysis, leaving unanswered questions about its significance in the context of early modern gender dynamics.<sup>74</sup> Steidele's account of Rosenstengel's sex life as outlined in the trial records would benefit from analytical pressure that embraces the source's ambiguities, resisting the urge to simply 'fill in gaps' to explore interpretative possibilities that might expand our understanding of the complexities of early modern sex and its representation.<sup>75</sup>

Overall, the biography often feels often more descriptive than analytical, lacking historical contextualisation concerning early modern understandings of gender and sexuality. As Helmut Puff reviewed Steidele's "biography has the characteristics of a novel: a picaresque novel (p. 2) - with the execution of the picaresque character at the end."<sup>76</sup> Steidele's work would have benefited from a clear theoretical and methodological set-up guiding the analysis and retelling of Rosenstengel's case throughout the biography. By pushing the theoretical engagement and interpretation into the final chapter, Steidele misses a more nuanced conversation with the existing historical literature and comprehensive analysis of how early modern society received: Rosenstengel's gender non-conformity; how Rosenstengel negotiated

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<sup>69</sup> "A[ct]a," Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62.

<sup>70</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 86, 94.

<sup>71</sup> "A[ct]a," Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62.

<sup>72</sup> Valerie Traub, "Afterword," in *Sex Before Sex : Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*, ed. James M. Bromley and Will Stockton (Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 292.

<sup>73</sup> "A[ct]a," Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62.

<sup>74</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 93.

<sup>75</sup> Traub, "Afterword," 292.

<sup>76</sup> Helmut Puff, "Angela Steidele, In Männerkleidern," *Historische Anthropologie* 14 (2006): 152.

their gender within their community, particularly as they successfully transed their gender for numerous years before being put on trial; and what this might reveal about early modern Prussian conceptions of gender/sex and their norms and values.

### 3 From History to Fiction: *Rosenstengel*

In 2015, Steidele wrote the epistolary novel *Rosenstengel: Ein Manuskript aus dem Umfeld Ludwigs II.*<sup>77</sup> In it, she presents an alternative approach to Rosenstengel's life that plays with the distinction between history and fiction. Written as a "queer archive," the novel is presented as the transcription of an archival file of letters compiled by the (fictionalised) Dr Müller.<sup>78</sup> The novel is part of the literary genre of biofiction that imaginatively explores real historical figures' lives through fictional means, such as invented dialogues, characters, and internal thoughts.<sup>79</sup> Thus, it embraces creative license to explore and expand possibilities for certain identities.<sup>80</sup> The novel has previously been analysed by literary scholars Daniel Fulda and Heidi Schlipphacke.<sup>81</sup> Their insights form the foundation of the argument presented in this chapter. Through its form as a queer archive, the novel creates an illusion of pure historicity, offering what appears to be unmediated access to historical sources. However, Steidele purposefully fictionalises Rosenstengel's story adding a constructed layer that the previous biography did not have. By highlighting Steidele's interpretative choices, I will demonstrate how the novel reveals her continued struggle to reconcile Rosenstengel's ambiguity with her desire to view them as a lesbian.

Building the letters out of different historical sources, Steidele deliberately plays with anachronisms, such as anachronistically quotes of Kant, Nietzsche or Goethe, subtly revealing the novel as a fictional creation.<sup>82</sup> However, whether the reader spots these anachronisms depends on their knowledge of the source, literature and historical context, resulting in varying levels of awareness about the novel's fictional nature, which is only revealed at the end in the

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<sup>77</sup> Steidele, *Rosenstengel*.

<sup>78</sup> Ann Cvetkovich defines queer archives as "a practice of fantasy made material. [...] they are composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science." Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003), 268; Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Eugenie Theuer, Caitríona Ní Dhúill, and Julia Novak, *Imagining Gender in Biographical Fiction*, 1st ed., Palgrave Studies in Life Writing, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>81</sup> Daniel Fulda, "Liebe geht durch alle Zeiten? Historische und poetologisch-selbstreflexive Anachronismen im romanhaften Geschichtserzählen von Sexualität und Geschlechterrollen," in *Romanhaftes Erzählen von Geschichte*, ed. Daniel Fulda and Stephan Jaeger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); Heidi Schlipphacke, "Lesbian Camp and the Queer Archive: Angela Steidele's *Rosenstengel: Ein Manuskript aus dem Umfeld Ludwigs II.* (2015)," *Literatur für Leser* 42, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>82</sup> Fulda, "Liebe," 93; Schlipphacke, "Lesbian," 75.

character's biographies. Thus, Steidele challenges the reader's perception of historical authenticity, blurring the line between fact and fiction.<sup>83</sup>

One particularly striking anachronistic change is Rosenstengel's execution. While the historical sources tell us the Rosenstengel was beheaded, the novel surpasses the cruelty of the historical sources, as the fictional Rosenstengel is not simply executed, but also publicly humiliated, violated, tortured, and finally drowned.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, when Rosenstengel is finally pushed into the river enclosed in sack filled with iron, they miraculously do not sink until the executioner pushes them underwater with a sharp spear colouring the water red.<sup>85</sup> Notably, Rosenstengel's fictional execution mirrors the 1477 trial of Katherina Hetzendorfer (assigned female at birth) in Nürnberg, who was downed for similar crimes.<sup>86</sup> With this change, Steidele symbolically feminises Rosenstengel's execution. Crucially, execution by drowning is typically associated with the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, where mostly women accused of witchcraft were tied up and thrown into a body of water to test their guilt. If they drowned, they were deemed innocent, but if they floated, they were deemed guilty of practicing magic and executed. The fictionalised execution associates Rosenstengel with the typically female crime and their floating indirectly identifies them as a witch.<sup>87</sup>

Typical of biofiction, Steidele creates a narrative imbued with symbolic truths that create a Rosenstengel as she envisions them.<sup>88</sup> Although playing with some gender ambiguity, the novel clearly leans towards depicting Rosenstengel as a lesbian disguised in men's clothing to romantically pursue other women, echoing Steidele's 2004 interpretation.<sup>89</sup> She partially fills the gaps and the silences in the sources that make the historical Rosenstengel an ambiguous subject who does not neatly fit any modern identity categories to constructing Rosenstengel's story as a tragic lesbian love story. More than simply presenting a reconstruction of plausible historical events, Steidele's fictional adaptation is influenced by the wish to see Rosenstengel as an ancestor to modern lesbians: her Rosenstengel is a tragic lesbian heroin.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Fulda, "Liebe," 103f.

<sup>84</sup> "A[ct]ja," Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62.; Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 337-39; Schlipphacke, "Lesbian," 77.

<sup>85</sup> Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 337-39.

<sup>86</sup> Helmut Puff, "Female sodomy: The trial of Katherina Hetzendorfer, 1477 (Negotiating rhetorical strategies for the representation of female eroticism in pre-Reformation Germany)," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 1 (Female sodomy 2000): 42, 46.

<sup>87</sup> Heikki Pihlajamäki, "'Swimming the Witch, Pricking for the Devil's Mark': Ordeals in the Early Modern Witchcraft Trials," *Journal of legal history* 21, no. 2 (2000): 36.

<sup>88</sup> Theuer, Ní Dhúill, and Novak, *Imagining*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Fulda, "Liebe," 95.

<sup>90</sup> Schlipphacke, "Lesbian," 75.

The fictional Rosenstengel denies having ever claimed to be a man, professing to a confidant that they chose to wear men's clothing to live a chaste life.<sup>91</sup> While this answer stems from the historical record, by taking it out of the trial context - where this defence was a matter of life or death and not simply the answer to a friend's question - the statement obtains a different connotation. Here, the statement appears more like a tongue-and-cheek answer to hide Rosenstengel's lesbian desire as the reader knows that they are not chaste. Further, one letter 'quoting' a fictional conversation between Rosenstengel and Frederick Wilhelm I appears conclusive:

'Is she a woman?' the king asked after a while.'

'Yes, God willing.'

'Then why does she put herself in men's clothes?'

'To do what women are forbidden to do.'

'As to play war for example?'

'To increase the fame of my king.'<sup>92</sup>

Again, Rosenstengel hints at the fact that they choose to disguise themselves as a man "To do what women are forbidden to do," yet readers can identify the hidden message that Rosenstengel is referring to loving women. Through such fictionalisation, Steidele thus positions Rosenstengel as a persecuted lesbian utilising cross dressing to be with their lover.

In constructing Rosenstengel as a heroic lesbian, they are presented as a figured that subsequent queer individuals can take comfort and strength from. Müller's reports about his research on Rosenstengel and Mühlhahn's lesbian-coded love story initially sparks Ludwig's interest in him and provides a template for their love.<sup>93</sup> Ludwig writes a romantic letter to Müller, cosplaying as Mühlhahn writing to Rosenstengel, to which Müller responds as Rosenstengel.<sup>94</sup> It is this act of cosplaying that enables the two men to express their love. Consequently, the novel subverts traditional queer historiography dynamics: lesbian desire, often unseen and unrepresented, becomes the foundation for male homosexual love – "without Rosenstengel, there would be no Ludwig-Müller love story."<sup>95</sup>

Biofictions are often discussed as a powerful tool for 'giving a voice' to disenfranchised individuals and communities.<sup>96</sup> Thus, Steidele's novel seemingly 'recovers' historical queer

<sup>91</sup> Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 294, 153.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

<sup>93</sup> Schlipphacke, "Lesbian," 83.

<sup>94</sup> Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 253-56.

<sup>95</sup> Schlipphacke, "Lesbian," 83.

<sup>96</sup> Theuer, Ní Dhúill, and Novak, *Imagining*, 20.

voices. However, of course, these voices are not actually ‘rediscovered,’ they are reconstructed and, in part, invented by Steidele. The very idea of ‘giving a voice’ to historical figures has problematic epistemological implications, as we can never *truly* know a historical subject’s mind.<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, the novel’s construction seems to address these problematic implications. Like the trial records, the letters are second-hand accounts of Rosenstengel’s life written by their contemporaries that only occasionally quote Rosenstengel—they only provide secondary interpretation of events. Steidele does not include any fictional letters written by Rosenstengel themselves. This is even addressed in the fictional letters, when Ludwig laments that Müller’s “epistolary novel” is still missing a written correspondence by Rosenstengel and Mühlhahn and even suggests that he could simply forge the letters to create a more complete love story. Müller responds that searching for such letters would be pointless since “the culture of letters was still in its infancy” and rejects his suggested forgery stating that “reality is more improbable than any invention.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, Steidele’s fictional letters indirectly acknowledge the layers of narration that separate us from the ‘real’ historical Rosenstengel. While she occasionally lets them ‘speak,’ their voice remains filtered through others and ultimately Steidele’s interpretation, purposefully denying ‘direct’ insights into Rosenstengel’s self-perception. In doing so, Steidele both critiques and participates in the fictional (re)invention of historical figures in biofiction but ultimately recreates the violence of the archive.

Indeed, the novel is filled with meta-commentary on biographical writing. Particularly, Müller who takes the role of biographer, searching and collecting the letter about Rosenstengel, mirrors Steidele and vicariously voices her theoretical concerns about the possibilities and challenges of writing Rosenstengel’s biography. While discussing the letters about Rosenstengel’s life, Müller and Ludwig engage in several theoretical discussions about history and historiography. Ludwig asserts that “History is the representation of what has happened” and must represent the past “*as it actually was,*” anachronistically quoting the historian Leopold von Ranke’s dictum.<sup>99</sup> He divides the historian’s role into that of the “*history-researcher,*” searching for the sources and inspecting their authenticity and truthfulness, and the “*history-writer,*” taking the historical findings to write a truthful but vibrant historical text.<sup>100</sup> Countering Ludwig’s position, Müller emphasises that collecting sources is insufficient; the real task lies in evaluating, weighing, and interpreting them. He questions

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>98</sup> Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 248-52.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 68, 75

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

whether it is even possible to reconstruct Rosenstengel's life story from the scattered historical records or if history itself is an intricate blend of discovery and invention. Müller concludes that it is neither possible to write history without gaps nor to fully resolve whether historical narrative is truly “found or invented.”<sup>101</sup> This discussion gives voice to Steidele’s own theoretical concerns regarding her biography of Rosenstengel. As such, the novel adds an interesting layer to the discussion of Steidele’s biographical approach to Rosenstengel putting analytical pressure on the distinction between biography and novel, history, and fiction.

Steidele’s novel can be characterised as what Fulda calls a “improved historical representation” imagining a queer history that never existed as such.<sup>102</sup> The probable historical world Steidele creates is one where lesbian desire exists and thrives in an environment that is initially blind to its existence but later embraces it. Initially, in Steidele’s fictional eighteenth-century Prussia, no one seems to comprehend lesbian desire. This blindness results in rather comical situations and a sort of secret communication between the novel’s lesbian figures and the modern audience.<sup>103</sup> For instance, Anna Magadlena Francke writes Dorothea Rosina Pott that her daughter Sophia who shares her bed chamber with Catharina Linck has begun to seem tired. Francke naively assumes that the reason for her daughter’s sleepiness is simply “the final growth and maturation of her body.”<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, for the reader, it seems almost comically obvious that her daughter is tired because Linck and Sophia are having a lesbian affair. The reader is put in the enjoyable position of being able to see through the misreading of Rosenstengel’s contemporaries “and is initiated into a kind of queer kinship with the lesbian figures within the novel.”<sup>105</sup>

However, as the story progresses, the novel invests the Pietism movement with a lesbian potential.<sup>106</sup> Steidele connects lesbian *Schwärmerei* (crush) with the Pietists movement, particularly the theory of the “divine Sophia.”<sup>107</sup> Especially, Anna Magdalena Francke and Dorothea Rosina Pott, who were associated with a kind of *Schwärmerischen* Pietism

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 73f.

<sup>102</sup> Fulda, "Liebe," 107.

<sup>103</sup> Schlipphacke, "Lesbian," 79.

<sup>104</sup> Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 165.

<sup>105</sup> Schlipphacke, "Lesbian," 79.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>107</sup> The belief of the divine Sophia holds that humanity was initially androgynous, embodying masculine and feminine qualities. After the fall, the feminine aspect was lost. However, the Virgin Mary's conception of the Son of God reunited these elements, enabling a spiritual rebirth that restores the original androgynous wholeness through union with Sophia, the personification of divine wisdom. Wolfgang Breul, "Ehe und Sexualität im radikalen Pietismus," in *Der radikale Pietismus Perspektiven der Forschung*, ed. Wolfgang Breul, Marcus Meier, and Lothar Vogel, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Pietismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 404f.

characterised by communal gatherings, celebrate Rosenstengel: first for their prophetic abilities to communicate directly with God, expressed in ecstatic often compensable utterances and even poetry, and then as a reincarnation of the “divine Sophia,” proclaiming that they represented the “birth of a new man-woman or woman-man.” After Rosenstengel expresses the desire to marry Mühlhahn, Francke begins to defend their relationship. Despite Pott’s insistence that Mühlhahn must know of Rosenstengel’s ‘true’ sex, Francke justifies their union by suggesting that love, as ordained by God, should be allowed to take its course. By the time the couple is imprisoned, Francke has ‘converted’ to a public supporter of lesbian love, arguing that if lesbians are “maidens” and not “women,” the Biblical condemnation of same-sex relations does not apply to them.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, Steidele’s novel offers an alternative perspective imbued with queer potential on eighteenth-century Prussia that diverges from conventional historical narratives.<sup>109</sup>

However, it is not merely a naïve projection of contemporary identity concepts but a consciously crafted reimagining of the past.<sup>110</sup> As Schlipphacke notes “Steidele’s epistolary novel relishes in the queer emotional attachments and slippery truths it presents.”<sup>111</sup> Especially, her deliberate use of anachronisms that underscores the constructed nature of the narrative reveal the novel functions as a medium for Steidele to explore her theoretical concerns regarding the writing of history and fiction – biography and novel –as well as her stance on gender and sexuality in relation to Rosenstengel.<sup>112</sup> Ultimately, Steidele’s fictional portrayal of Rosenstengel echoes her struggles of the biography’s concluding chapter to reconcile them with modern identity categories and revealing the tension between her desire to see the lesbian in Rosenstengel and their historically specific gender ambiguity that refuses any adequate modern categorisation attempts as the following chapter will demonstrate.

#### 4 Interpreting Rosenstengel – Lesbian, Trans, Queer?

In an interview, Steidele remarked that “Despite all my research, the question of whether Linck was a lesbian, or a trans man remains unanswered,” which she attempts to resolve in the concluding chapter by exploring how Rosenstengel might be interpreted according to modern identity categories.<sup>113</sup> As noted in the introduction, both biography

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<sup>108</sup> Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 166, 223-25.

<sup>109</sup> Fulda, "Liebe," 95f.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>111</sup> Schlipphacke, "Lesbian," 74.

<sup>112</sup> Fulda, "Liebe," 101f.

<sup>113</sup> Steidele, interview.

editions address this question but reach different conclusions. While in 2004, Steidele is confident in her interpretation of Rosenstengel as an early lesbian, who “merely pretended to be a man [...] out of pragmatism, not inner compulsion,” by 2021 she is less comfortable with this conclusion “hav[ing] become more cautious about interpreting the sources primarily as testimonies of lesbian desire” in response to the rise of trans history.<sup>114</sup> Though the 2021 begins to question the validity of the identity approach, Steidele problematically continues to engage in the debate whether Rosenstengel can be interpreted as lesbian or trans.

As in 2004, Steidele begins the 2021 edition with the ‘proto-trans’ reading of Rosenstengel noting that they put on men’s clothing at age fifteen and “tried to be recognised as a man” for the remainder of their life, and listing what could be described as ‘manly’ acts, such as: peeing while standing; displaying a ‘healthy’ sexual appetite desiring exclusively women; and, buying sex from sex workers.<sup>115</sup> Unfortunately, Steidele does not analyse how Rosenstengel ‘performed’ their newly adopted gender through these ‘manly’ acts. Exploring how Rosenstengel transed gender in their daily life could reveal the interactional scaffolding and control processes that sustain gender norms, offering insights into how they navigated and potentially challenged the rigid gender expectations of their time.<sup>116</sup>

Following this ‘proto-trans’ reading, Steidele reintroduces her 2004 ‘lesbian’ reading that she ultimately leans towards, creating a binary argumentative structure. Steidele hypothesises that Rosenstengel’s decision to wear men’s clothing was merely a means to an end to pursue romantic relationships with women, as the conditions (familial, social, judicial, economic) that would allow women to live together as couple had not yet been created. She emphasises that “as a Lesbian in man’s clothing,” Rosenstengel had “only advantages” in a patriarchal society, for instance access to economic privileges, more financial security and greater geographic mobility.<sup>117</sup> This hypothesis posits Rosenstengel as a historic ancestor to modern-day lesbians and interprets their transing as “disguised homosexuality.”<sup>118</sup>

*Motive* is Steidele’s central determinant for whether Rosenstengel was trans or lesbian. This approach effectively looks for evidence – ideally a personal testimony – that Rosenstengel’s gender nonconformity was internally motivated by gender identity alone to determine whether they are part of trans history. As Kit Heyam explains, “This pervasive

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<sup>114</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2004), 144; Steidele, interview.

<sup>115</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 177.

<sup>116</sup> West and Zimmerman, "Doing," 10.

<sup>117</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 179.

<sup>118</sup> Judith Shapiro, "Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 252.

cisnormativity means that the cis perspective is [...] positioned as objective truth.”<sup>119</sup> Consequently, historians tend to demand higher standards of evidence to ‘prove’ historical figures may be called ‘trans’: the historical figure in question must have continuously transed their gender and offered firsthand testimony indicating a desire to be recognised as the gender they lived as, thus presenting a narrative that aligns with contemporary Western notions of being trans.<sup>120</sup> Such a view belies an implicitly queerphobic and transphobic anxiety of “misqueering” historical figures, which underlies this demand for evidence.<sup>121</sup> Even if such stringent criteria are met, the fact that person lived before the emergence of contemporary terms for trans identities is enough for the outright dismissal of their trans possibility.<sup>122</sup> In short, Rosenstengel is cisgender until proven otherwise.<sup>123</sup>

The problem with this approach is that we are asking an early modern individual to provide us with a ‘trans confession’ that conform to our modern ideas of what a trans narrative ought to look like. The ‘cookie-cutter’ trans narrative starts in childhood, where the individual expresses a consistent feeling of being in the ‘wrong body’ while adhering to gender stereotypes opposite to their gender assigned at birth. Following a prolonged and difficult internal struggle, they come out, medically transition to align their body with their internal gender identity, and lead a conventional, heteronormative-passing life. This very narrow notion of a linear trans journey leaves no room for gender fluidity, ambiguity, “playful or creative approaches to gender,” individuals who feel that external factors influence their gender more than internal ones, or those who struggle to clearly articulate their gender or simply refuse to do so. It requires a clear differentiation between internal gender identity and external gender expression or role – a distinction that is not historically universal.<sup>124</sup> Following this, Steidlele argues against reading Rosenstengel as trans because they never “claimed to be actually a man or to live in the wrong body.”<sup>125</sup>

The idea that trans individuals feel as if they are born into the ‘wrong body’ imagines their experience “in terms of an error of nature whereby gender identity and biological sex are

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<sup>119</sup> Heyam, *Before*, 21.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* 10, 14.

<sup>121</sup> Margaret Middleton, "Queer Possibility," *Journal of Museum Education* 45, no. 4 (2020): 431.

<sup>122</sup> Heyam, *Before*, 10.

<sup>123</sup> The term “cisgender” or “cis,” refers to individuals who identify with their birth-assigned gender and dates to the 1990s. *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* 15-25.

<sup>125</sup> *Bericht von Friedrich Wilhelm von Grumbkow an Friedrich I. von Preußen*, I. HA Geheimer Rat, Rep. 63 Neuere Kriegssachen, Nr. 834, Bl. 42 Rs. und 43 Vs. [Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin]; Steidlele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 178..

not only discontinuous but catastrophically at odds.”<sup>126</sup> The trope emerged in mainstream discourse because of what Joe Latham has called a “feedback loop” between medicine and trans people.<sup>127</sup>

Colby Gordon highlights that “contemporary trans subjects are trapped in the confessional” as they need to almost ritualistically repeat ‘their journey’ “to access the medical and legal tools of transition.”<sup>128</sup> Crucially, for this, the manner in which they retell ‘their journey’ must adhere to a medical professional’s narrow understanding of the trans experience, which has resulted in compulsive reinforcement of such tropes.<sup>129</sup> As Sandy Stone remarks the trope implies a “phallogentric, binary character of gender differentiation,” insinuating that “only one body per gendered subject is ‘right,’” while all others are “wrong.”<sup>130</sup> It excludes trans individuals who define their gender independently from their physical body as their gendered embodiment fail to be culturally intelligible according to this binary understanding.<sup>131</sup> The metaphor of transitioning from the ‘wrong body’ to the ‘right’ perpetuates the idea of stable gender identities.<sup>132</sup>

This inhibits a thorough examination of desire and the complexities of motivation, failing to capture the contradictions and nuances of individual experiences, thereby eliminating any sense of ambiguity or fluidity.<sup>133</sup> The trial documents were never meant to provide such personal testimony. Claiming that its *absence* constitutes proof that Rosenstengel viewed themselves as a woman merely highlights the limitations of this analytical approach.<sup>134</sup> We simply do not know how Rosenstengel felt about their body. Additionally, these limitations allow us to question Steidle’s interpretation. For example, after being convicted to hang for deserting the army, in the last moments under the gallows Rosenstengel revealed themselves as a ‘woman’ to escape certain death—though they specifically asked to not be exposed.<sup>135</sup> Rather than interpreting this as a gender confession, I see Rosenstengel’s decision as an act of

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<sup>126</sup> Jack Halberstam, “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” in *Female Masculinity* (Duram: Duke University Press, 1998), 143.

<sup>127</sup> Joe R. Latham, “Axiomatic: Constituting ‘Transsexuality’ and Trans Sexualities in Medicine,” *Sexualities* 22, no. 1-2 (2018): 4.

<sup>128</sup> Colby Gordon, “The sign you must not touch: Lyric obscurity and trans confession,” *Postmedieval a journal of medieval cultural studies* 11, no. 2-3 (2020): 195-97.

<sup>129</sup> Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now: From Foundation to Futures* (London: RED GLOBE PRESS, 2020), 171.

<sup>130</sup> Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 297.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 298.

<sup>132</sup> Halberstam, “Transgender,” 171.

<sup>133</sup> Stone, “Empire,” 297.

<sup>134</sup> Manion, *Female*, 10.

<sup>135</sup> “A[ct]a,” Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62.

desperation, as they reluctantly ‘revealed’ themselves to be a ‘woman’ in a last attempt to save themselves by taking advantage of the common naturalisation of sex and gender and the nature of military regulations that were exclusively made for men.<sup>136</sup> Their request for discretion shows that Rosenstengel was aware of potential negative consequences if it was revealed that they were transing their gender. They clearly very carefully chose when and how they transed their gender and were always in negotiation with their environment.

Steidele also applies Laqueur’s *Making Sex* to Rosenstengel’s history to determine how Rosenstengel would have understood their own gender.<sup>137</sup> Applying social constructionism to the history of biological sex, Laqueur hypothesises that “Sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented” and proposes a two-stage model in the European interpretation of sex.<sup>138</sup> First, the “one-sex” model that was popular from antiquity to the end of the seventeenth century” imagines differences between male and female bodies as variations of essentially the same sex.<sup>139</sup> Within this model, a person’s sex was positioned along a spectrum of “maleness,” essentially imagining “woman” not as distinct category but as an incomplete version of “man” with “inverted” male organs, with physical and spiritual heat causing the differences between men and women. Subsequently, a sex “change” would be theoretically possible if a person’s temperature changed dramatically.<sup>140</sup>

In the “two-sex” model, which supposedly replaced the previous model, understood men and women as fundamentally different. Consequently, individuals were no imagined “with only two possibilities for their ‘true sex’.”<sup>141</sup> Placing Rosenstengel in this historical shift, Steidele claims that “Because the gender roles were not yet derived from nature, and therefore bodies were not yet interpreted as eternal and unchanging, Rosenstengel did not have to question, whether she was not a woman, because she wore male garments or wanted to appear as a man or desired women”. Steidele thus rejects the possibility of Rosenstengel viewing themselves as something other than a woman.<sup>142</sup>

Notably, while *Making Sex* continues to be canonical text, it is not without its criticisms. For example, as Angus McLaren notes, Laqueur’s chronology is “maddeningly vague” and gives little explanation for specifically why and when this proposed shift in thinking occurred,

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<sup>136</sup> Marian Füssel, "Between Dissimulation and Sensation: Female Soldiers in Eighteenth-Century Warfare," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 4 (2018): 532.

<sup>137</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 176.

<sup>138</sup> Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 149.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

<sup>140</sup> Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence*, *The history of medicine in context*, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 26.

<sup>141</sup> King, *One-Sex*, 26.

<sup>142</sup> Steidele, *Rosenstengel*, 175f.

only that it did.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, his theory relies mostly on evidence from medical and philosophical texts and while their (mostly male) authors may have genuinely believed in the “one-sex” model, that does not necessarily mean everyone shared their opinions.<sup>144</sup> It seems more likely is that multiple models co-existed. As Helen King notes, she “found it difficult to identify any historical period in which a ‘one-sex’ model dominated.”<sup>145</sup> Considering these criticisms, Steidele’s conclusion appears far less convincing.

It may, instead, be more fruitful to look at the historical sources and specific early modern Prussian context for answers about how sex and gender were understood by Rosenstengel and their contemporaries. As Megan Cassidy-Welch and Peter Sherlock emphasise, “if we understand gender to be *only* a social/cultural construction, then the emotional and psychic elements of an individual life are ignored.”<sup>146</sup> Subjectivity is not entirely shaped by ideological constructs; rather, it is shaped by personality, which develops through lived experiences and the emotional reactions to those experiences; and unfortunately, we do not have insight into Rosenstengel’s<sup>147</sup>

Gender non-conforming individuals, like Rosenstengel, did not live in a vacuum in early modern Europe, though we also cannot assume that Rosenstengel *was* exposed to such gendered discourse (ex., hermaphroditism or gender transformation)<sup>148</sup> However, considering their religious upbringing, they likely would have encountered them at least in a religious context. For instance, the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas includes a scene in which Jesus announces he will transform Mary Magdalene into a man “so that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who has become male will enter into the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>149</sup>

Moreover, a particularly interesting aspect to consider for Rosenstengel’s understanding of gender is their involvement with radical Pietism. Ulrike Gleixner makes the argument that

“The Pietist reform movement had considerable influence on the construction of gender. Gender boundaries became more permeable, new forms of self-definition were practiced, and the agency of both sexes was enlarged. Due to the postulated

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<sup>143</sup> Angus McLaren, "Review," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993): 282.

<sup>144</sup> Lindemann, "Gender," 143, 46f.

<sup>145</sup> King, *One-Sex*, 7.

<sup>146</sup> Megan Cassidy-Welch and Peter Sherlock, *Practices of Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008), 319.

<sup>147</sup> Cassidy-Welch and Sherlock, *Practices*, 319.

<sup>148</sup> Marissa Crannell, "Utterly confused categories : Gender non-conformity in late medieval and early modern western Europe" (MA The University of Wisconsin, 2015), 2.

<sup>149</sup> *Gospel of Thomas*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 114.

equality of the sexes before God and the focus on personal piety, new possibilities emerged for the activities of both men and women.”<sup>150</sup>

Remarkably for eighteenth century Prussian society, Pietist groups embraced mix-gendered spaces – outside of family and employment – in which women were included and often treated as equals. Different from the church and Rosenstengel’s strict religious and patriarchal upbringing at Francke’s orphanage, women could lead prayers and become prophets just like their male peers. Furthermore, the pietist focus on introspection and on the personal relationship between God and the individual strengthened new processes of self-definition and agency of individuals.<sup>151</sup> The radical pietist Baptists believed that the Christian baptism should be a voluntary decision made by adults, thus it is no coincidence that Rosenstengel’s decision to join the radical Pietists officially marked their transition from Catharina Linck to Anastasius Rosenstengel. Thus, radical Pietism provided Rosenstengel with the intellectual framework to redefine their identity and a space to trans their gender, and as Gleixner states “Pietist conversion was based on the transformation of the individual;” while they may have entered the water as Catharina Linck, but they left the water as christened as Rosenstengel. Their conversion not only encompassed a religious transformation but a transformation of gender.<sup>152</sup>

Overall, the idea of gender transgression was highly visible in early modern European culture, both in popular culture and medical discussions. However, even within these transformation stories, gender was defined by a person’s anatomical sex. Seemingly, only physical transformation justified a change in gender. Plays such as *The Roaring Girl* (1611), in which a woman disguised herself as a man, did not simply accept women who cross-dressed as men but often ended by restoring the gender binary and hierarchy with the women returning to her ‘proper’ social role.<sup>153</sup> Rosenstengel’s contemporaries seemed to understand gender as essentially interconnected with ‘biology,’ specifically a person’s genitals. Both during the violent incidence that led to Rosenstengel’s mother-in-law reporting them and during the trial itself, a physical examination of Rosenstengel’s body was used to ‘confirm’ their gender/sex as female. The trial records specifically note that there was “nothing hermaphroditic, much less masculine” about Rosenstengel’s body.<sup>154</sup> Even if Rosenstengel’s transformation of gender

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<sup>150</sup> Ulrike Gleixner, "Pietism and Gender," in *A Companion to German Pietism, 1660-1800*, ed. Douglas H. Shantz, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 423.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 430.

<sup>152</sup> Gleixner, "Pietism," 428.

<sup>153</sup> Jane Baston, "Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion in *The Roaring Girl*," *Studies in English literature, 1500-1900* 37, no. 2 (1997).

<sup>154</sup> “A[ct]a,” Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62.

seemed conceivable to their contemporaries, it had to manifest itself in their body in accordance with physical boundaries created around what was ‘male’ and ‘female.’ Notably, while gender and sex were not as distinctly separated as they seem today, both were socially constructed - beyond a person’s anatomy gender roles and expectations were intertwined with factors like age, social standing, marital status, occupation.<sup>155</sup> Rosenstengel’s story highlights the inherent inconsistency of the gender social order, showcases that there was not a simple unified concept of gender as Steidele suggest. Their ability to live as their chosen gender and renegotiate their gender several times with their environment for decades revealed the constructed nature of gender roles and thus threatened the stability of the gendered social order. Their case demonstrates how the legal system contributed to the enforcement of this order by drawing social boundaries around physical bodies.

Ultimately, Steidele’s ‘trans versus lesbian’ debate mirrors what queer theorist Jack Halberstam has termed “border wars”: to justify reading Rosenstengel as a lesbian, Steidele claims that lesbian history has been made “invisible, ridiculed by queer studies,” noting historian’s continued struggle to identify women as lesbian in premodern eras.<sup>156</sup> This approach reflects an understanding of historical figures as scarce resources, prompting a perceived need for historians from different fields to compete over their interpretation and legacy. Halberstam’s border wars describe this phenomenon that the claiming of historical figures as trans resulted in anxiety among historians of sexuality, who felt that their histories were being ‘stolen’ or ‘erased’ as the same historical figures are interpreted both as trans and gay/lesbian/bi history. This notion of historical representation as a limited resource that historians need to fight over and ‘claim’ for their historical ‘territory’ imagines history through a capitalist perspective of ownership rather than something that we should share and explore together. Moreover, historical figures do not always neatly fit into our modern identity categories that shape the historical fields. Viewing these historical figures through a trans historical lens does not take away from any prior interpretation within lesbian/gay/bi history. Rather, stories such as Rosenstengel’s show us how sexuality and gender intersect in ways that complicate our attempts to neatly frame them as just lesbian/gay/bi history or trans history, demonstrating how these categories overlap and fails to “successfully catalogue or explain the infinite vagaries of human diversity.”<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa M. Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 1 ed., Themes in Medieval and Early Modern History, (London: Routledge, 2020), 7.

<sup>156</sup> Halberstam, "Transgender," 287; Steidele, *In Männerkleidern (2021)*, 178.

<sup>157</sup> Halberstam, "Transgender," 144, 50, 72f.

We will probably never know what motivated Rosenstengel in this instant, and throughout their lives, and it is entirely possible that they had multiple, intersecting, and shifting motivations here and across their life in transing their gender.<sup>158</sup> We should recognise that external gender expression can influence or alter our internal feelings, whether temporarily or permanently, regardless of initial motives. Instead of getting hung up on trying to pinpoint Rosenstengel's identity-forming motive, it would be far more interesting to investigate how their actions shaped their life and what it might reveal about early modern notions of gender and sexuality.

#### 4.1 Moving beyond the Identity Approach?

So far, the analysed identity-based framework mirrors Steidele's 2004 chapter, however as noted in her 2021 revision cracks begin to appear in her argumentation and Steidele starts to question the validity of her own approach, partially anticipating the critique this dissertation proposes. Firstly, Steidele remarks that trans and homosexual personalities were more similar in the eighteenth century than today because "Linck was able to change her gender, but not her sex," since hormone therapy and operations were not available, thus leaving no physical "evidence."<sup>159</sup> Accordingly, the obstacle with interpreting Rosenstengel as lesbian or trans is a technical not a methodological problem. As such even in critiquing the approach, Steidele misses the central methodological problem of applying quite rigid and ahistorical notions of gender to the past.

Secondly, Steidele insinuates that because Rosenstengel's self-conception was less shaped by her gender or her sexuality and more by their social standing – the real "decisive factor of identity" in early modern Prussia – the approach's exclusive focus on gender and sexuality does not do early modern identity conception justice.<sup>160</sup> Again, the question of how early modern people constructed their identity could potentially help us understand Rosenstengel's experience and the society they lived in, but the critique misses the point. It is not the fact that social standing was allegedly more important than gender and sexuality to understanding Rosenstengel's that makes the identity approach problematic. Identities are and have always been multifaceted – never just determined by a singular factor. Only because one identity factor weighed more in a person's self-conception does not mean that we cannot examine the other factors. It only means that we must consider how these factors might intersect

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<sup>158</sup> Manion, *Female*, 6.

<sup>159</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 179.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* 174f.

and influence each other to provide a nuanced analysis. The problem of the identity approach lies in its restrictive, unnuanced reading of Rosenstengel. Instead of trying to understand Rosenstengel on their own term, it attempts to force them into one of two categories that fail to capture the complexity of their life.

Thirdly, Steidele critically highlights a recent tendency to apply contemporary terms more liberally to historical phenomena, arguing that queer, lesbian, or trans say very little. Steidele notes that the conception of sexuality and gender in terms of identity and the differentiation between “homosexuality, transsexuality, and transvestism” are only recent development, implying that they are not applicable to pre-modern history.<sup>161</sup> Historians of gender and sexuality have long debated the question of anachronisms and historicity.<sup>162</sup> Scholars who favour a continuist approach argue for similarity between past and present, while those focusing on historical differences tend to emphasize the problems of anachronism, evolving terminology, and resistance to teleology. I agree that, used simply as identity markers, such terminology should not be uncritically projected onto historical subjects as they do not capture past practices and experiences. However, this does not mean that these terms have no analytical potential. Only because these terms did not exist during the early modern period does not mean that people did not challenge and renegotiate their contemporary norms and values of gender and sexuality, as Rosenstengel’s case demonstrates. There seems to be a double standard regarding the terminology of trans and queer history, as Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura poignantly ask, “why [do] we think ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are any more transhistorical, or less contingent, than any other category of identity and why [do] we persist in the presentist fallacy of ontologizing a current framework and imposing it on the strangeness of the past.”<sup>163</sup>

Steidele especially rejects “queer” as a useful concept for interpreting historical figure as it “avoids the question, which subcategory Catharina Linck should be attributed to – as elegantly as despondent.” Critiquing queer as a methodological approach, Steidele claims that “no one will discover love relationships between middle-class women in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century using the search grid queer.” Seemingly thinking of “queer” as merely a broader synonym for descriptors like gay/lesbian/bi, Steidele misses the term’s analytical potential.<sup>164</sup> Of course, searching for “queer” as a mere descriptor during a period when it was not used as it is in current queer theory makes little sense. Crucially, the term’s

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid. 174, 182.

<sup>162</sup> Valerie Traub, “The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography,” in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, Haney Foundation Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2015).

<sup>163</sup> Stryker and Aizura, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>164</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 177.

utility does not lie in whether we can successfully use it as a search keyword. Queer is a “deliberately ambiguous term” that describes the challenging of what is considered normal, legitimate, or dominant describes and has come to encompass many other concepts, including gender and sex.<sup>165</sup>

Being a subfield of critical theory, queer theory is the critical reading of societies and history as it pertains to “queerness.”<sup>166</sup> “Queerness” is always relative to the time and culture of any given historical analysis, since what is considered normative or transgressive is unstable, constantly in flux and “highly indicative of threatened ideological positions.”<sup>167</sup> Since we look at the boundaries of norms and values of a society when investigating queerness, it can help us understand how past societies understood certain concepts such as gender and sexuality and how they were negotiated. From this perspective, historians translate past experiences into a form that is legible for modern audience. If we were to generally reject the use of words just because they are modern or because their modern meaning is unlike that in the period we study, we would ultimately have to resort to writing in the language of the period we are studying, which would rather hinder our endeavour as historians to make sense of the past and how it relates to the present. Rather than projecting trans as an identity onto historical subjects, by utilising it as an analytical concept we can “encompass the diversity of experiences of people in the past whose gender did not coincide with the gender assigned at birth.” Using the term in such a way enables us to place the modern and premodern in conversation and highlight patterns in shifting understandings of bodily diversity and gender across history.<sup>168</sup>

Steidele’s conclusion seems to acknowledge the limitations of her identity approach, stating that “Her/his changing identities make Catharina Margaretha Linck alias Anastasius Lagrantinus Rosenstengel into a surprisingly modern personality, who cheerfully refuses every categorisation attempt.”<sup>169</sup> However, while I agree that Rosenstengel refuses categorisation, I disagree that they are a “surprisingly modern personality.” Rosenstengel’s transgression of gender does not make them “modern.” Trans historians have demonstrated that there have always been people who transed gender and disrupted gender norms, and thus is not an essentially modern phenomenon.<sup>170</sup> By declaring Rosenstengel’s transgression as “modern,”

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<sup>165</sup> Monaghan, Whitney, *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media: Not “Just a Phase.”* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 7 quoted in McCann and Monaghan, *Queer*, 1.

<sup>166</sup> Crannell, “Utterly,” 11.

<sup>167</sup> Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, “Introduction: The Guarded Body,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3.

<sup>168</sup> Marta V. Vicente, “Transgender: A Useful Category?,” *TSQ* 8, no. 4 (2021): 428.

<sup>169</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 182.

<sup>170</sup> See *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

Steidele dismisses their history as unrepresentative and therefore indirectly irrelevant to the study of early modern gender.

While I have clearly separated Steidele's application of the identity approach in the chapter from the criticism to allow for a clear argumentative structure, this is not the case in Steidele's chapter where both are interwoven and often contradict one another. For instance, Steidele first criticises the use of modern terminology, such as trans and lesbian, only to then ask the very question "Was Catharina Linck a Lesbian? Or a trans man?" attempting to read Rosenstengel according to the very identity categories she just criticised.<sup>171</sup> So, why did Steidele return to the original question? Why does Rosenstengel need to be allocated to one of these categories? Steidele seems to struggle with embracing Rosenstengel's ambiguity and unknowability.<sup>172</sup> Ultimately, because of Steidele's decision to simply adapt her 2004 approach and argumentation without following through with its conclusion, the reader is left confused as to what the point of the chapter was. The chapter's premise seems unclear. While Steidele has moved away from firmly categorizing Rosenstengel as a lesbian and has begun to reevaluate her approach in response to the increasing prominence of trans history, the 2021 chapter still reveals a lingering desire to rationalise Rosenstengel's identity through modern categories. However, by seeking to make Rosenstengel legible within contemporary identity constructs, Steidele may be overlooking the richness of their gender ambiguity and the potential for a more nuanced understanding of their historical experience. As Halberstam has pointed out "Transgender history should be a discourse which allows the gender ambiguous to speak; too often the histories of women who pass as men or the narratives of transgender men attempt to rationalize rather than represent transgender lives in the glory of all their contradictions."<sup>173</sup>

## 5 Conclusion - An Alternative Approach to Rosenstengel's Case

For the conclusion, I wish to propose an alternative approach to analysing and narrating Rosenstengel's history that aspires to build on the criticism outlined but that ultimately would exceed the scope of this dissertation. As Steidele notes "Perhaps the greatest advantage that biography has over the novel as a genre is the possibility of questioning the same source material again and again."<sup>174</sup> So, before proceeding, I want to acknowledge that, despite my

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid. 174.

<sup>172</sup> Steidele, interview.

<sup>173</sup> Jack Halberstam, "Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography," *Auto/Biography Studies* 15, no. 1 (2000): 69.

<sup>174</sup> Steidele, *Poetik*, 87.

critical analysis of Steidele's approach, her extensive primary research was invaluable to my work, and I am grateful for it.

This dissertation has argued that the problem with Steidele's identity approach is that it fails to capture the complexity of Rosenstengel's life within their specific historical context. As Manion highlights, this modern focus on gender and sexuality as identities distorts our perception of the past, inhibiting us to recognize "the significance of rebellion against systemic gender norms in the absence of a declaration of self-hood."<sup>175</sup>

Accordingly, rather than focusing on a gender diagnosis, I propose to embrace Rosenstengel within their specific historical context in order to create space for "trans possibility."<sup>176</sup> Building on the trans historical methodology outlined in the introduction, particularly Sear's transing analysis and the concept of relational gender, I plan consciously hold space for ambiguity while putting analytical pressure on the biases and silences shaping the sources.<sup>177</sup> For this, I would draw on Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation," which challenges traditional historical narrations and explores the political and ethical intricacies of reproducing archival violence. Critical fabulation involves a narrative approach that deliberately resists closure by refusing to fill in historical gaps, aiming not to "give voice" to disenfranchised individuals but to imagine the unverifiable aspects of their experiences. Hartman encourages historians to construct a "history written with and against the archive," focussing on "what might have been or could have been."<sup>178</sup> Such an approach would allow for a more nuanced analysis of how Rosenstengel understood, challenged, and negotiated their gender and sexuality without imposing a fixed identity. Trying to understand Rosenstengel in their own terms would facilitate a better understanding of the historical relativity of concepts such as gender and sexuality and consequently how our present understanding of those concepts is equally relative and subject to disruption.<sup>179</sup>

Instead of a traditional chronological biography, I would begin Rosenstengel's story with the court trial, centring the circumstances and dynamics that shaped the creation of the surviving sources, to consciously acknowledge the multiple layers of narration. Rosenstengel's life would be explored through a micro-historical framework, adopting the setting of the legal trial as a frame story to highlight the historical constructionism of both the sources and my

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<sup>175</sup> Manion, *Female*, 9.

<sup>176</sup> Heyam, *Before*, 21.

<sup>177</sup> Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, 1st ed., Haney Foundation Series, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2015), 136.

<sup>178</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11f.

<sup>179</sup> Heyam, *Before*, 169.

narration. Moreover, unlike a traditional biography which typically solely focuses on a single historical figure, the micro-historical framework would allow for the more in-depth exploration of other historical figures related to the trial to examine how Rosenstengel was embedded into and perceived by their wider social network. Particularly, their wife Catharina Magaretha Mühlhahn played a crucial role in legitimizing Rosenstengel's gender in the eyes of society and thus is central to making sense of their lived experience.<sup>180</sup>

The micro-historical framework would take inspiration from Ulinka Rublack's *The Astronomer and the Witch: Johannes Kepler's Fight for His Mother*, which investigates the life of Katharina Kepler, focusing on the Kepler family's trials and tribulations that ensued after Katharina was prosecuted for alleged witchcraft, with the aim to "open up a panorama of early modern life before our eyes." Grounded in multifaceted historical evidence, Rublack's micro-history offers a detailed historical account "from the ground up" that highlights various diverse voices from a large social spectrum, revealing the complex beliefs and values of the time. Tracing the everyday realities of early modern life – how people made a living, solved conflicts, and conceptualized the supernatural – the book demonstrates how the study of individuals like Katharina Kepler and particularly their trials can illuminate the past's broader societal dynamics, values and rules when placed in a broad enough context.<sup>181</sup>

One key question that has remained insufficiently addressed in Steidele's work and that I believe could guide this micro-history is "Why was Rosenstengel executed?" The obvious answer can seemingly be found in the trial records: Rosenstengel was executed *for sodomy*. And yet, such an answer fails to encompass *why* this conclusion was reached - what norms values and beliefs led to the decision to take Rosenstengel's life. I believe that by asking this question, we can learn much about how gender and sex were defined and the importance of societal norms surrounding gender, marriage, and sex in early modern Prussia.

Interestingly, Steidele touches upon such question in her 2002 dissertation, engaging with the arguments of Faderman and Kord.<sup>182</sup> Both argue that Rosenstengel was executed not merely for their sexual practices but for claiming male privileges through gender transgression, which threatened the established social order. They maintain that while lesbian relationships alone did not threaten societal norms, rejecting female roles while engaging in such relationships sparked societal anxiety. Rosenstengel's defiance of gender roles involvement in

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<sup>180</sup> Manion, *Female*, 3.

<sup>181</sup> Ulinka Rublack, *The Astronomer & the Witch: Johannes Kepler's Fight for his Mother*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7, 305f.

<sup>182</sup> Steidele, "Liebe," 39f.

certain sexual acts, particularly with a dildo, intensified societal outrage and explained the harsh punishment compared to their wife's.<sup>183</sup> Steidele counters that Rosenstengel's execution was primarily due to their admission of sodomy, specifically penetrating their wife with their dildo, which made them liable for prosecution under sodomy laws—arguing that early modern phallogentrism in sexual acts explains why Mühlhahn was spared. She maintains that Rosenstengel's gender transgression played a minor role in the court's dissent since adopting male privileges did not inevitably lead to punishment, citing Dekker and van de Pol had found cases where FTM cross-dressing was recognized positively.<sup>184</sup>

In the proposed work, I would like to continue this debate initiated in Steidele's dissertation offering an alternative perspective on why Rosenstengel was executed. While it is true that sodomy was the main point of indictment that officially decided Rosenstengel's execution, I hypothesize that the specific circumstances of the "crime" – Rosenstengel's sexual relations in the context of marriage - were central to the final verdict. I argue that the pivotal factor leading to Rosenstengel's execution was not just their transing of gender or sexual relations with Mühlhahn, but specifically their decision to marry and assume the role of husband.

To explore the role of marriage and husbandry in relation to Rosenstengel's trial could offer an interesting new perspective on their history and reveal how the early modern social order functioned in relation to gender and sexuality. If Rosenstengel had not married, they might have avoided execution or received a lighter sentence. We know that transing gender did not automatically result in the death penalty, as evidenced by Rosenstengel's gallows incident, their ability to semi-openly trans their gender working for the university clothier in Halle, and other cases such as the 1717 trial of Anna Maria Joseph (assigned female at birth) in Freiburg, who after transing their gender was sentenced to a whipping and banished but avoided further punishment.<sup>185</sup> Because of their marital status, people could no longer assume Rosenstengel as celibate or asexual.<sup>186</sup> If Rosenstengel had been able to fulfil their role husband – providing for their wife, leading a household, starting a family – their mother-in-law might have accepted the couple despite suspicions, and their story might have never come to light.<sup>187</sup> As Merry Wiesner notes, the early modern courts' primary concern was to maintain public order, which

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<sup>183</sup> Faderman, "Transvestism," 46-61; Kord, "Eternal," 229.

<sup>184</sup> Steidele, "Liebe," 42f; Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (London: MacMillian Press Ltd., 1989).

<sup>185</sup> Lindemann, "Gender," 14.

<sup>186</sup> Manion, *Female*, 25.

<sup>187</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 113.

included preserving marriage and, by extension, the family as the fundamental unit of society by prohibiting non-marital, non-procreative sexuality.<sup>188</sup> Rosenstengel's successful adoption of the male gender – specifically the role of husband – threatened the naturalised connection between gender and sex which formed the basis for the patriarchal social order. Accordingly, the court's violence against Rosenstengel emerged from a desire to uphold the social order based on the naturalised gender binary. I argue that Rosenstengel's execution set an "abominable example" sending a clear message to everyone who might trans gender: legal marriage with a woman was crossing a line that would not be tolerated.<sup>189</sup> The denial of a Christian burial for Rosenstengel symbolically excluded them from their community even after death by refusing them the opportunity to ever enter heaven.<sup>190</sup>

For a potential large study, I believe that by examining the broader socio-cultural and legal contexts of Rosenstengel's case, we can move beyond merely reconstructing their life events to interrogating the societal structures and beliefs that shaped those events. Focussing on how Rosenstengel transgressed and navigated gender norms across the various communities they lived in, such as the radical Pietist and the Prussian army, would provide a richer understanding of their lived experience and offer insights into the complexities and relationality of gender, sex, and sexuality in early modern Prussia. Through challenging and renegotiating notions of sexual differences and heteronormativity, Rosenstengel exposes the historic construction of these ideas – their incoherence and instability – and opens a window into prevailing views of their time.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Merry E. Wiesner, "Disembodied theory? Discourses of Sex in Early Modern Germany," in *Gender in Early Modern German History*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 158.

<sup>189</sup> A[ct]a," Sig. I. HA GR, Rep. 33 FH, Nr. 62.

<sup>190</sup> Steidele, *In Männerkleidern* (2021), 159.

<sup>191</sup> Manion, *Female*, 6.

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