Conflict or Compromise? Identity and the Cathedral Chapter of Girona in the Fourteenth Century

Caroline Smith

Identity, as expressed through behavior or the written word, is mutable. It can be shaped by exterior forces or can be formed by the individual. The concept of self-fashioning of identity, at its most basic, expresses the idea that individuals can and do formulate their own program of behavior, enacted to reflect individual and corporate goals and priorities. The applicability of this concept has a wide scope, and it can provide a valuable lens through which to view individuals and groups in medieval Iberia, a world in which identity was multifaceted and depended, to varying degrees, on one’s status, family background, profession, confessional identity, and more. While the set of cultural constraints governing behavioral practices and priorities obviously differs depending on time and space, the concept of self-fashioned identity can serve as a valuable framework of analysis in the medieval Iberian context because of the possibility for mobility between different motivations and actions, depending on the context and the individuals involved.

Stephen Greenblatt discusses self-fashioned identity as expressed through literary works, but behavior can also be a valuable expression of identity because it similarly reflects priorities, values, and relationships, whether this information is transmitted voluntarily or involuntarily. Identity is both a cause and a product of behavior; self-selected and self-fashioned identity can lead a person to act in a certain way, motivated by the desire to project a certain image. The expression of that identity, then, is displayed to the world in a way that can be intentionally managed by individuals to control the impression given to others. There is, of course, the possibility for disconnect between “real” identity and the image projected by the individual, based on what the individual chooses to express. In that case, the process of self-fashioning allows for an individual to manipulate his or her image through the selection and management of

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1 The concept of self-fashioned identity comes from Stephen Greenblatt, as discussed in Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), but this concept can be applied beyond the Renaissance context discussed by Greenblatt because, at its core, the idea is about how people conceive of themselves and how this is reflected in their action, thoughts, and writings.
behavior and values to fit with how he or she wants to be seen by others. Identity, therefore, is not simply static, it is “a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated” and “must be enacted and portrayed.” A person has agency to form his or her own identity rather than simply acting out what is socially and institutionally prescribed for someone of his or her position and status. Because personal identity is derived from the way in which these roles are expressed and not just from the roles themselves, individuals can choose which norms to follow and create their own identity.

This theoretical framework makes it possible to study the identity of the canons of the cathedral chapter in Girona, who left no personal writings but whose actions are revealed in extensive archival documentation. The canons, like all people, had prescribed roles, but they did not simply follow them automatically. They had the ability to accept, reject, or reshape expectations to integrate the role of their ecclesiastical position with their own personal priorities, resulting in an identity that served as a compromise between or combination of ecclesiastical and familial expectations. The behavior of cathedral canons was obviously governed by a set of accepted standards, but the privileged position of the

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3 Even when individuals are fulfilling corporate expectations, this does not discount the possibility of personal motivations for corporate behavior. Rituals, or ritualized practices, can represent individual motivation in addition to traditional practice, which is, of course, very important when considering the life and behavior of a corporate religious body like the cathedral chapter of Girona. For discussion of this concept, see Sharon Farmer, “Personal Perceptions, Collective Behavior: Twelfth Century Suffrages for the Dead,” in *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. Richard Trexler (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1985), 237.
5 The Arxiu Diocesà de Girona (hereafter referred to as ADG) contains a wealth of documentation in a variety of series of registers, most of which begin around 1290. The registers of episcopal letters, registers of the episcopal notariate, and registers of the foundation and provision of benefices have been most valuable for this paper because of the variety and depth of information they provide about the canons’ activities and relationships.
6 In the secondary literature on cathedral canons, these kinds of questions and issues receive little attention. Most studies focus mainly on the structure and dignities of the chapter, religious duties, administration of the chapter patrimony, and relationships with the bishop. Some hints at the possibility for analysis of canons’ identity can be found in sources that mention canons’ social origins, relationships with their families, or role in the secular world, but there is usually little discussion of the specifics or their wider implications. For such mentions, see Paul Freedman, *The Diocese of Vic: Tradition and Regeneration in Medieval Catalonia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 40–2; R.I. Burns, "The Organization of a Medieval Cathedral Community: The Chapter of Valencia," *Church History*