



Christopoulos, John. Abortion in Early Modern Italy

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Christopoulos, John.

Abortion in Early Modern Italy.

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History 25. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. 368 + 6 ill. ISBN 978-0-674-24809-0 (hardcover) US\$51.

It is a jarring experience to read this historical study of abortion in early modern Italy after the 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. The parallels between then and now crystallize a long history of patriarchy. But the experience of reading *Abortion in Early Modern Italy* also illuminates historical differences. As John Christopoulos explains, “[T]here were many circumstances and motivations related to sexuality and reproduction that led women and men to contemplate and procure abortions, and for communities to facilitate or ignore it” (8). This book recovers those circumstances and motivations—and often the voices of these women—to show how the regulation and punishment of abortion played a conflicted and complex role in the culture of post-Tridentine Italy.

Based on extensive archival sources, the arguments of this book are organized around three chapters: medicine and women’s bodies, the church, and the law. Each chapter is anchored by an extended court case involving, respectively, Rosana Ansaloni from Rome, Femia de Andreoza from Trevignano, and Marie de Vecchis from Sezze. Drawing on learned medical texts, both Latin and Italian, the first chapter constructs a medical framework for abortion. This framework describes the “health literacy” of Italian communities, and at the same time, highlights ambiguities. The ambiguities of medical diagnosis were evident in interpretations of the signs of pregnancy: what for one Costanza was a case of illness caused by blocked menses was for one Violante a mostly certain pregnancy. The ambiguities of purgative medicines meant that some purgatives could be recommended for indigestion, though they were also thought to function as abortifacients.

Turning to the church, the second chapter begins with an account of a woman from Lodi who confessed her sin of having received an abortion in the year 1590. Had she confessed a couple of years earlier, the local priest and confessor would have had the power to absolve her of her sin. But in 1588, Pope Sixtus V issued a papal bull, the first ever to address abortion, which eliminated the distinction between a pre- and post-animated fetus and declared

that all abortions were murder (thereby punishable by excommunication from the church and by capital punishment in secular courts). Thus, the woman was not absolved and was told either to go to Rome to seek absolution or be excommunicated. Unable to travel to Rome for financial reasons, the woman waited. The bishop was alerted to her case, wrote to Pope Sixtus V, and surprisingly, the pope granted the bishop's request to give absolution. The story frames a chapter devoted to the ways that the church wrestled with the prospect and goal of regulating abortion given the intractable nature of the social realities of the flock. In the months following the bull, the pope reviewed the requests for absolution (from penitents unable to travel) and allowed them all—men, women, accomplices—to be absolved locally. A state of exception thus emerged around the realities of these penitents. Subsequently, the papacy made abortion important to its broader program of moral and clerical reform. Rather than routinely implementing harsh punishments, however, the church worked to deter abortion because it was sinful, harmful to individual and community, and resulted in punishment for those involved.

As the third chapter on the law shows, trials for abortion also contained ambiguities. The chapter opens with the case of Femia, who claimed that Antino, the local cleric and her lover, forced her to have an abortion. The details of this case show how unwilling jurists were to assign personhood to the fetus and to recommend the death penalty for Femia. In other cases too, it was more typical to assign punishments to the guilty that were not lethal: fines, labour, corporeal punishment, or exile. In many cases, women were found to represent themselves in courts of law, where they were often treated as victims; judges viewed women as “the weaker sex” and sometimes used this to diminish the punishment. As Christopoulos concludes, the ambiguities in this setting were exploited: judges and jurists prioritized honour and social order rather than the meticulous enforcement of the law.

In religious and secular institutions of the period, abortion was a problem, a sin, and a crime, but in many, many cases, the ambiguities around it become sites of exception, reconsideration, and leniency. Even in the context of the post-Tridentine church, the courts, the community, and the occasional pope sometimes remained overtly sympathetic to the conditions of women and the choices they made or were forced to make with respect to their reproductive health. In his conclusion, Christopoulos encourages a reading of history that resists teleological outcomes, arguing against representations motivated

by self- or external interests. Not a history placed in the service of a desired present, this book brings a fresh, sensitive eye to a long-standing concern.

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