

Craig M. Rustici. *The Afterlife of Pope Joan: Deploying the Popess Legend in Early Modern England*.

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Few legends associated with the history of the Roman Catholic pontificate have been as persistent as that of the “popess” Joan — the cross-dressing “she-pope,” or “whore-pope,” who allegedly ruled the see as John VIII before succumbing two years later to lust, pregnancy, and death either from childbirth or a Roman lynch mob. Attempts to prove the veracity of the legend have always been complicated by the lack of a written record until four hundred years after her supposed rule in 855, and even then, in the thirteenth century, the narrative of her life was already beginning to gather around itself layers of invention and textual elaboration. However, as Craig M. Rustici demonstrates in *The Afterlife of Pope Joan*, the significance of the story rests not in its truth so much as the manner in which it illuminates the interests and obsessions of societies that lent their own constructions to it. In the case of early modern England, such constructions took on heightened importance even if they also remained representationally unstable and wholly unpredictable in the end.

Popess Joan was not always depicted as a harlot fated to dangle from a gibbet in hell — Boccaccio had imagined her as basically virtuous despite her “wicked fraud” (15–17) — but anti-papal reformation discourse seized upon her as an especially powerful tool in its polemic against the Catholic Church. Ironically, however, in the absence of solid textual proof for Joan, Protestant writers “sought evidence from sources they conventionally approached with deep distrust: Catholic traditions, images, and ceremonies” (43). The most popular English treatise on Joan, Alexander Cooke’s *Pope Joane: A Dialogue between a Protestant and a Papist* (1610) typified this dilemma over evidence, forcing the author to rely upon

Catholic hagiography and specifically “transvestite saints’ narratives” (44), which he himself critiqued in order to prove, against Catholic writers, that Joan did in fact exist. But if Catholic traditions were dubious, then Joan had to be too; yet Cooke persisted, in order to claim that the Catholic Church, for two years in the ninth century, “[hopped] headless,” broke the apostolic succession, and “[rendered] the Roman Church a mere pretense” (60).

The relatively limited number of Joan-related treatises published during Elizabeth’s reign was due, Rustici argues, to a broadly practiced self-censorship based upon the discomfort that could arise from associations made between queen and she-pope. Indeed, if the royal supremacy essentially made the monarch a pope (or popess), as the Calvinist Anthony Gilby claimed, the comparison would sit uncomfortably, despite Elizabeth’s assumption of the title supreme governor rather than head of the church. The traditional ascription of “whore” or “harlot” to Joan (and of course, the Whore of Babylon to the Church) could also, for later detractors such as Thomas Dekker, extend to Elizabeth; Rustici, however, tends to focus on the well-examined association of the queen with the Whore of Babylon, and though general analogies with Joan could be made, the precise comparative role that she played in relation to Elizabeth is left somewhat unclear. Seeking to rehabilitate the image of Joan, Catholic contemporaries such as Nicholas Harpsfield (not Alan Cope, as the book states) argued that the popess was in fact a hermaphrodite — a statement that provoked a scorn that was typical of early modern ambivalence about sexual indeterminacy. The Protestant John Bale, on the other hand, would introduce Joan not as a hermaphrodite but as a necromancer, as he “elaborat[ed] elements — demonic assistance and transgressive learning — already present in the popess legend” (108). While the qualities of learnedness and erudition (even on the part of women) should not in themselves have been discarded, Bale wrote, the popess’ idolatrous pursuit of necromantic books “demonstrated that these [Roman Catholic] libraries and the literary culture they fostered and exemplified . . . needed reform” (123).

The years from 1675 to 1689 witnessed an increase in Joan-inspired publications, which shared an affiliation with pope burnings and other incidents of anti-Catholic hysteria. In a final chapter, Rustici extensively explores one such publication, a play by Elkinah Settle entitled *The Female Prelate: Being the History of the Life & Death of Pope Joan, A Tragedy* (1680), which reworks the legend of Joan (or “Joanna Anglica”) to create a revenge tragedy for the times. Conveying the message that “disaster awaits, if the English people, like [the characters in the play], fail to comprehend fully and learn from their ancestors’ deadly and polluting infatuation with popery,” *The Female Prelate* represents a “Whig critique of popery as a pernicious ideology and a threat to English sovereignty” (143, 146).

The legend of Popess Joan has benefited as a whole from Rustici’s treatment, at least as it was adapted to the historical and religious developments of early modern England. Some of Rustici’s claims are problematic: his argument that popess treatises were censored during Elizabeth’s reign might explain the relative lack of texts published, yet John Foxe had much to say about Joan (for that matter,

Rustici would have benefited from examining all four editions of the *Acts and Monuments* published in Foxe's lifetime, as opposed to the highly problematic Townsend edition of 1965). Moreover, the possible thinness of the material seems to compel Rustici to find refuge in the deeper waters of a Spenser or Dekker, who detain him perhaps for too long. Still, *The Afterlife of Pope Joan* is to be commended as a fascinating literary study and intellectual history, as it conveys the textual fate of a somewhat hapless figure whose virtue and learnedness are overwhelmed by the sulfurous fumes said to engulf her, causing her to exclaim even in life, "By Hell, I scorch already" (146).

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