

Emily Michelson. *The Pulpit and the Press in Reformation Italy*.

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. 262 pp. \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-07297-8.

Hundreds of monographs and articles have been published on single aspects and individual preachers in early modern Italy, and yet with the exception of Corrie Norman's lengthy book chapter in *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period* (ed. Larissa Taylor [2003]) there has been no comprehensive study of the topic as a whole. Michelson's rich book has the great merit of filling a rather surprising gap in the historiography. This void could be partly ascribed to the complexity of the subject and to the large number of sources, primary and secondary, that had to be consulted for such a work. *The Pulpit and the Press* is based

on a vast number of sixteenth-century books, and Michelson demonstrates a solid command of the secondary literature, both in Italian and in English. The primary sources are not limited to sermons, but also include works of other kinds, such as preaching guides and treatises written for laypeople against heresy, which are seen as a genre strictly related to sermons.

At the core of the book under review lies the “desperate war,” “physically but also spiritually violent,” of Catholic preachers against the penetration of Protestant ideas in Italy (1). The book covers the period from the surge of editions of sermons in the 1540s until the late sixteenth century, after the defeat of the Italian Protestants. The bulk of the study, however, focuses on the middle decades of the century, when the Council of Trent was still ongoing and the result of the war still uncertain. The viewpoint adopted is that of the Catholic clergy bound on defending Roman orthodoxy in order to preserve the Church from an external threat. This approach is very different from the one of a large body of recent scholarship that focused on the people who disseminated Protestant doctrines in Italy. The reader will not find in this book much about heterodox preachers such as Bernardino Ochino or Pier Paolo Vergerio, but a wealth of material on familiar and less familiar orthodox figures. Indeed one of the merits of the book is to engage both with well-known individuals (such as Gabriele Fiamma and Cornelio Musso) and minor ones (such as Evangelista Marcellino and Silvestro Cigno) who have been largely neglected by previous scholars. The insightful analysis of their writings emphasizes that Catholic preaching was not monolithic but embraced a variety of views, styles, and approaches.

Michelson sees Catholic preaching as part of a strategy to create a new religious culture for lay people. The Council of Trent forever changed Italian preaching by promoting the simple and straightforward style of the bishops in opposition to the long and elaborate one of the mendicant orders, which had always had a monopoly. This transition also affected the role of scripture in preaching, which was seriously challenged after the Reformation. The Protestant idea of the direct access to scripture induced many Catholics to associate scripture with heresy.

The core argument of the book, neatly summarized in the closing page, is that “preachers were perhaps most responsible for the suppression of heresy” (181). This is the point of arrival of an interpretation of the sources aimed at demonstrating how persuasion, and not coercion, was the key weapon for the defeat of religious dissent in Italy. Such an argument goes against a historiographical approach widespread especially among Italian scholars, such as Massimo Firpo and Gigliola Fragnito, and is likely to spark a lively debate. Against this tradition, Michelson underplays the role of Catholic repression in favor of the skill of orthodox preachers. She puts herself firmly in the camp of those who argue for a Catholic reform rather than a Counter-Reformation, asserting that actions like the fight against the vernacular and against the comprehension of scripture were not representative of the general attitude of the Roman Church.

However one sees it, Michelson’s book is by far the most detailed and comprehensive work on preaching in early modern Italy and is a valuable

contribution to our understanding of Italian religious history of that time. A minor complaint I have is the absence of a bibliography, an essential instrument for the reader wishing to orient him- or herself in the vast amount of sources used by the author. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the book's importance for scholars interested in Catholic sermons in sixteenth-century Italy.

STEFANO DALL'AGLIO

University of Leeds