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ELLIOTT, DYAN. *The Corrupter of Boys: Sodomy, Scandal, and the Medieval Clergy*. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. viii + 378 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

This is a powerful and important book. Dyan Elliott's central thesis is that the scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church in recent decades concerning the sexual abuse of children have their roots in the Middle Ages. This is not an entirely new claim. Popular and scholarly efforts to historicize clerical abuse have been made since at least the beginning of the millennium, when the *Boston Globe* first began publishing the results of its investigations into abuse by Roman Catholic priests in the Boston area, as popularized in the 2015 film *Spotlight*. Mark Jordan has previously observed that this media scrutiny seemed "like one more chapter in a chronicle that began in the Middle Ages" ("The Confusion of Priestly Secrets," in Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea and Virginia Goldners, eds., *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims: The Sexual Abuse Crisis and the Catholic Church* [Mahwah, NJ: Analytic Press, 2007], 232). But Elliott's study is the most trenchant and comprehensive treatment to date of the *longue durée* of clerical child abuse and the conspiracy of silence that surrounds it.

Many of the sources examined in *The Corrupter of Boys* will already be familiar to researchers of medieval sodomy and its cognates. In part 1, which surveys the problem of clerical sodomy from late antiquity to the thirteenth century, texts such as Peter Damian's *Book of Gomorrah* loom large as a point of reference. Forty years ago, John Boswell had famously presented the early and high Middle Ages as a time of tolerance for male same-sex relations, as evidenced in the flowering of homoerotic poetry by twelfth-century churchmen such as Baudri of Bourgueil and Marbod of Rennes. Instead, Elliott forcefully draws attention to the likelihood

that what was being tolerated was not homosexuality per se, but the abuse by older and more powerful males of younger males for whose welfare they were responsible. Hence the book also categorically rejects Boswell's mobilization of sexual orientation as an organizing framework. As she puts it, where Boswell saw the "Triumph of Ganymede," referring to the youth abducted by the god Jupiter who is forced into sexual servitude, her own analysis tends to foreground the "Triumph of Jupiter" (10).

As well as charting the evolution of clerical abuse in the early church and establishing the complicity of penitentials and canon law with this climate of toleration, Elliott demonstrates that indictments of sodomy by polemicists such as Damian were rarely motivated by a desire to protect children or to bring their vulnerability and victimhood into focus. Rather, they deployed the problem of clerical sodomy opportunistically; in Damian's case, it was to ensure the purity of church sacraments. Furthermore, Elliott argues that accusations of same-sex relations within the Anglo-Norman court around 1100, as witnessed in charges of sodomy or effeminacy levelled by monastic chroniclers at William Rufus, King of England, should be viewed as a projection on the part of the clergy of their own unfulfilled desires. Similarly, clerical attacks on the wives of women were ultimately exercises in deflection. As she puts it, in the evocative sentence that draws chapter 4 to a close: "Like illusionists practiced in the art of misdirection, Anglo-Norman chroniclers ensured that their audience was looking the wrong way: not at same-sex relations within clerical culture, but at depraved rulers and their courtiers" (109).

Part 2 collates later medieval accounts of the prosecution of clerical abuse in a range of ecclesiastical settings: monasteries, choirs, schools, and episcopal curias. The evidence surveyed in this section is deeply troubling, as Elliott pivots from indictments by theologians, canon lawyers, and chroniclers (where the realities of child abuse tend to be obscured by euphemistic language, as in the expression "the sin not fit to be named"), to surviving records of ecclesiastical tribunals in which the violence and brutality of clerical abuse intermittently comes

into view. Here the strategies deployed by medieval church leaders to deal with sodomy in the ranks, uncannily reminiscent of the strategies adopted by their modern-day counterparts, also enter the field of vision. Necessarily, in view of the relative paucity of documented cases, Elliott ranges widely, from the 1303 case of Brother Jordan at the Swiss priory of St.-Victor, accused of practicing the “vice against nature” both inside and outside the cloister (163), to the singular testimony of Donato Piermaria Bocco, vicar-general for the bishop of Pistoia, who raped boys with impunity for years and, even after his case finally came to court in 1507, managed to escape imprisonment.

My own research on representations of sodomy led me to conclude that, based on the texts and images under investigation, it is often difficult to see through the thick fog of euphemism and hysteria that tends to surround medieval discourse on same-sex relations in order to access the truths of clerical or monastic sex lives. As such, while age-structured pederasty clearly played an important symbolic role within medieval Christianity, I was not able to say for certain that this necessarily constituted the predominant pattern of same-sex relations in religious settings in the period. In the *Bibles moralisées*, for example, images from which Elliott cites in passing that clearly condemn the sexual coupling of older and younger males, age differentiation was not the only way in which artists rendered sodomy visible to the viewer. Depictions in the same manuscripts occasionally foreground other structures, such as violations of gender hierarchy, as a means of visually condemning desires deemed unnatural. If I had had access to Elliott’s analyses at the time, I would almost certainly have revised some of my earlier conclusions. Viewed through the lens of this penetrating book, a very different picture also emerges—one in which the concealment or obfuscation of predatory behavior by the clerical establishment casts a dark and enduring shadow.

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