

BOOK REVIEW

John Christopoulos, *Abortion in Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 368 pp.

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In this work, John Christopoulos draws on a range of perspectives from medical, social, religious, and legal history to offer a rich, engaging, and detailed account of the history of abortion in early modern Italy. Handling his subject matter with care and sensitivity, he reconstructs how early modern Italians thought about and responded to women's bodies and the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, stillbirth, and abortion. The latter category, Christopoulos explains, encompassed not only the deliberate termination of pregnancy, but also situations in which the pregnancy was ended by accident or by violence inflicted by another party. The book is structured around three main chapters which respectively treat the themes of medical, religious, and legal responses to abortion. They are each separated by a short story drawn from the archives that provides a case study to illustrate the themes of the foregoing chapter.

In the first chapter, Christopoulos demonstrates that knowledge of women's bodies and how to procure an abortion was widely diffused within Italian society. This chapter explores contemporary medical understandings of women's bodies, pregnancy, and fetal development, and considers the circumstances in which early modern Italians considered procuring an abortion acceptable. Christopoulos carefully explains the difficulties that early modern Italians faced when seeking to establish whether a woman was indeed pregnant or suffering from an ailment that presented in a similar manner. He also notes the means employed for treating medical disorders relating to the female reproductive system, for instance the administration of powerful purgatives or bleeding the saphenous vein, were often the same as those employed to procure an abortion. Early modern Italians also knew that it might be possible to induce a miscarriage by inverting advice dispensed to pregnant women to safeguard their unborn child, such as avoiding vigorous exercise. From a medical perspective, abortions were often considered acceptable. For example, if the fetus in question were aborted before the point at which it was considered to be infused with

a soul (around forty days in boys and eighty in girls), or if there was perceived to be a serious threat to the mother's health, the intentional ending of a pregnancy was not regarded as homicide. By utilizing such knowledge, early modern Italians were able to terminate pregnancies. Direct evidence for the extent to which abortion was practiced remains limited, however, for records of the event were often only generated by disputed cases that came before civil or ecclesiastical courts.

While abortion appears to have been relatively common and, in many instances, tacitly accepted in early modern Italy, many Christians understood that intentionally procuring an abortion was on some level sinful. In the late sixteenth century, members of the Catholic hierarchy attempted to assert tighter control over the practice of abortion. Situating his discussion of abortion in the context of post-Tridentine reform, Christopoulos stresses the importance of the confessional as means to educate and discipline Catholic society. Reforming bishops such as Carlo Borromeo were concerned that individual parishioners offered perfunctory confessions whilst the priests hearing them often failed to comprehend the full import of the procurement of abortion. While the Council of Trent had sought to address such issues by introducing seminaries for priests, bishops such as Borromeo also reserved to themselves the right to absolve individuals involved in an abortion. In 1588, Pope Sixtus V made an important intervention by passing the bull *Effraenatam*. Overturning the established principle that the abortion of pre-animate fetuses was not homicide, he asserted that abortion was not acceptable in any circumstance and that this sin could only be absolved via an appeal to Rome. Although acknowledging that this bull would be regarded by modern scholars as a key indication of the future development of Catholic thought, Christopoulos demonstrates that in the late sixteenth century it was regarded as unworkable, and Sixtus's successor, Gregory XIV, rapidly sought to lessen its impact.

In the final chapter, Christopoulos turns to consider how abortion was understood and discussed in legal treatises and judicial process. Within sixteenth-century Italian secular law there was no consensus over the precise definition and status of abortion, nor regarding the penalties that should be meted out to those found guilty of seeking to deliberately terminate a pregnancy. While jurists tended to agree that abortion could be considered a form of homicide, they acknowledged that in practice it was not possible to treat it in this manner in court. Although courts employed expert witnesses, including midwives and physicians, it was difficult to determine such questions as whether a woman knew she was pregnant, the intention that lay behind taking a medicine that could either be used alleviate illness or procure an abortion, the fetus's developmental stage, or if a newly delivered child was still born or the victim of neonaticide. As Christopoulos also demonstrates, courts were also willing to consider mitigating circumstances presented to them. Significantly, contemporaries also knew how to present themselves, and which narratives and evidence to mobilize in court in order to appear in the best possible light.

Christopoulos's work is based on a detailed and imaginative engagement with the archival records, which allows him to present the stories of the women and men who

sought for various reasons to procure an abortion. The work concludes with subtle reflections on the implications of this study for the present age, stressing that modern ideas and values did not inevitably develop out of this period of Catholic reform. He ends with a timely reminder that a historical study of this complex and emotive subject will ultimately show that “Abortion was not a simple matter, not for authorities, not for communities, and certainly not for women” (p. 257). This fascinating book will be of interest not only to historians of medicine, but also scholars working in a wide range of fields including, but not limited to, the history of post-Tridentine reform, social, and gender history.

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