

*Defiant Priests: Domestic Unions, Violence, and Clerical Masculinity in Fourteenth-Century Catalunya*, by Michelle Armstrong-Partida. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. Pp. 392. ISBN: 9781501707735.

In the later eleventh century, Western European monks convinced high-ranking secular clergymen that the *vita regularis* (living under a monastic rule) provided better guidance for spiritual leaders, especially in fostering humility and celibacy. Integrated into the norms henceforth upheld by the so-called Gregorian Reform movement, clerical sexual mores diverged from those that continued to hold sway in Christian traditions further east, affecting the status of women, marriage, procreation, and progeny. By many accounts, this interpretation of *imitatio Christi* remained dominant in the Catholic Church until and well beyond the Protestant Reformation, showcasing the Roman curia as a major (bio)power broker already before the crusading era. In the history of sexuality specifically, this transition encapsulated the ultimate emasculation/feminization of priests or, according to another line of thought, the creation of a third gender.

Reformers were certainly successful in eliminating marital practices—even chaste ones—from the ecclesiastical social landscape. But the formal prohibition on contracting marriages did not translate uniformly into the suppression of concubinage, that is to say an informal but committed form of cohabitation. Such domestic partnerships could and often did lead to establishing a fully-fledged family household, which required the management and inheritance of shared property and strategizing about the future welfare of the couple's offspring. Evidence for these practices is scarce for northwestern Europe, but has been occasionally traced for the Italian peninsula and now, thanks to Michelle Armstrong-Partida's compelling study, for fourteenth-century Catalunya as well. Here, too, what should have been a relic of the Church's deep past, was in fact commonly practiced and widely tolerated, not only by the communities in which priests and their spouses and children lived, but by the very ecclesiastical authorities that monitored them during routine visitations.

That much becomes abundantly clear from the evidence amassed and ably marshalled in *Defiant Priests*, which takes the reader on a vivid tour of priestly households across the region's numerous towns and villages. Away from Rome and other wealthy centers of Christian learning, theological constructs of spiritual athleticism, based on an ability to conquer one's pride and bodily desires, melted away before entrenched attitudes to manhood. These included, alongside a celebration of virility and fertility, the fostering of pugnacity and economic prowess. In the real world occupied by urbanites and rustics, a *pater*

*familias* worth his salt was expected to acquire and defend a superior role both within and beyond his church by other means than turning his other cheek. In other words, clerics, like laymen, remained (hetero)sexually active and (much like monks and friars as well) routinely engaged in verbal confrontations with coreligionists, neighbours, women and children, and fought physically (though rarely to the death) to assert their dominance in different walks of life.

Ecclesiastical legislation from the region and especially the visitation records Armstrong-Partida examines paint a very earthly, if admittedly partial, picture of male pastoral leadership in the later Middle Ages. Yet rather than falling into the easy trap of moral judgment, the author develops a sociological explanation for why clerics emulated and perpetuated traditional forms of masculinity, namely “because they were so pervasive throughout medieval society and were more powerful than the Church ideological creation of clerical masculinity that eschewed physical violence” (251). In other words, low-ranking clergymen really had little choice but to act this way, if they wished to secure their place in society. More than a few didn’t, however, even if we were to accept the author’s insistence that the evidence from visitation records is merely the iceberg’s tip. Moreover, if clerics’ social-Darwinist drives were so strong, and the hand of diocesan officials so weak, what were these priests in fact defying, except perhaps an ideological construct of an all-powerful and homogenous Church that was nearly irrelevant in this place and time? Armstrong-Partida almost makes it seem as if the real defiant priests in Catalunya were those who obeyed canon law, as numerous clerics openly lived in carnal sin, carried weapons, and shed blood, for which they were in effect taxed rather than punished.

At any rate, the gender perspective developed by *Defiant Priests* is important. It brings to light another instance in which a medieval male establishment vehemently rejected female agency. As the author notes in critiquing her key sources, women are routinely described in legal and visitation records as passive objects upon which clerics asserted their dominant social position across and beyond Catalunya. Women were certainly loved and admired, their companionship sought and their wombs prized, but they were also threatened, beaten, raped, kidnapped, sequestered, and abandoned with relative impunity. On the other hand, as Armstrong-Partida convincingly demonstrates, it is possible to read against the grain of officialdom’s records in at least two interrelated ways. In the first instance, the degree to which actions described in the sources as placing women in utterly subordinate roles is quite likely glossing over or indeed reacting to the events’ transactional nature. After all, entering a *de facto* marriage with a priest meant living under emotional, sexual, social, and material

conditions widely recognized by the surrounding community as normative and even desirable. Indeed, in certain ways a *mater familias* of a clerical household could exercise significant power in one of the most prominent homes of a given community, and in this sense such women were far more common than abbesses. To achieve this admittedly precarious position, let alone maintain it, would have certainly required constant negotiation and ingenuity, not just victimhood and passivity. Secondly, the traditionalism of lay and clerical culture, at least in the Catalunyan countryside, meant that women, and especially fertile women, reinforced masculine identities without necessarily reducing their bodies to a battleground of manhood or a stage of masculinity.

In sum, *Defiant Priests* is an absorbing work of social history and gender identity. Readers will be able to enjoy it in full, or access its clearly demarcated sections on domesticity (chapters 1-3) and violence (chapters 4-6) as major constituents of medieval masculinity that straddled lay and clerical cultures, to the extent that the two realms could actually be set apart. The prose is lucid, although individual chapters lack sufficient subsections to facilitate smoother navigation, and the book as a whole is somewhat repetitive. The author's insightful reading of visitation texts as sources for the history of masculinity and female agency contrasts with their occasional acceptance as objective truths rather than constructions or strategic allegations, and plays down the active role that diocesan scribes, canon lawyers, and bishops played in fitting witness testimony into neat and prosecution-friendly charges. Finally, unlike women's agency, which the book willingly explores, children's agency is largely neglected, perhaps unwittingly rendering them passive objects mostly shaped by their fathers' (mis)behavior, but never their mothers' compliance or resistance.

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