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Alain Boureau, *The Myth of Pope Joan*. Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001. x + 386 pp. Preface to the American edition, reproductions, bibliography, notes, and index. $60.00 U.S. (cl); $22.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-06745-9.

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History is not simply *what happened*. It can and has been argued that history is as much (or more) about what *people believed happened*. French historians have led the way, beginning with the Annales school, continuing through the study of *mentalités*, and what has now become almost standard practice: "new historicism" and microhistory. Alain Boureau's study of the myth of Pope Joan, using the methods of historical anthropology, was first published in French in 1988 and is here brilliantly translated by Lydia Cochrane. The book is a bold and innovative foray into realms in which history and fiction cannot be differentiated. It illustrates Boureau's breadth of cross-disciplinary research, superior analytical skills, knowledge of the subject matter, and wit. Its scholarly scope and argumentation should put to rest the continuing belief of some that a "papess" once ruled Christendom, even though Boureau carefully skirts the issue by avoiding words such as "impossible."

The story is fairly basic, despite various transmutations according to the reason for its dissemination and the intended audience. Most narrators situate Joan's papacy in 855, after the death of Pope Leo IV, although some suggested it occurred as late as 1100. According to the myth, "John," who was English, was a very well-educated woman whose lover took her to Athens, disguised as a man. There her already formidable intellectual skills were honed. She later taught the *trivium* in Rome and was so widely admired for her erudition and eloquence that she was elected pope unanimously. However, along the route to the Lateran, her dirty little secret was revealed in spectacular public fashion. Having been impregnated by her lover during her two-year reign, she gave birth on the street between the Colosseum and San Clemente.

The legend of Joan is a wonderfully scurrilous tale, although it contains interesting elements that at times overpower the seemingly overt misogynistic content. Moreover, the sex of the protagonist was usually incidental, at least to most medieval authors who retold the story. Prior to the Lutheran Reformation, it had far more to do with issues of power, disputes among different groups within the Catholic Church, and the carnivalesque elements of ritual. After the Reformation, it was obviously a very useful tool, especially for the early Lutherans who made such effective use of woodcuts to satirize the Church and its most powerful representative, the pope.

Boureau approaches the "problem" of Pope Joan through a study of rituals, which contain multiple meanings depending on time, place, and personal involvement, for "even when [ritual] is strictly laid down, [it] never has a unique function; it is reformulated, shaped by differing universes of belief and perception" (p. x). Ritual is key in understanding the development of the myth and its propagation. Part one is devoted to such a study, with titles and content that at once combine humor with in-depth interpretation. Chapters one, two, and three, "The Pontificals;" "The History of a Chair;" and "The Pope between Two Stools," discuss an alleged rite to test the sex of the pope that in fact never existed. The

rite of "verification" involved seating the pope on a special pierced chair. In the presence of witnesses, two clerics discreetly verified the sex of the pope. Assuming he was truly a he, they then proclaimed to the assembled crowds "*Testiculos habet*!" to which the people respond "Thanks be to God." Once the pope has proven he has "pontificals," he presumably can assume the duties of his position.

People, including those in high places, believed the story from at least the thirteenth century. Why? Boureau demonstrates that detours in the papal procession, the existence of pierced chairs, and the changing relationship between the people of Rome and an increasingly dominant papal presence both in that city and beyond all played significant roles in assembling the elements that would give birth to Joan. The Cornomania, a carnivalesque ritual of inversion that took place after Easter, was, according to the author, stronger in Rome than elsewhere. As with the feasts of fools or abbeys of misrule described by Natalie Zemon Davis and others, a scheduled period in which the world was turned upside down both served to strengthen community bonds and functioned as a form of social release. For Boureau, the Cornomania was "a lighthearted counter-liturgy that was intimately connected with the Easter cycle and was focused on the Lateran" (p. 81). What had once been evidence of papal goodwill soon was overshadowed by the increasing temporal and spiritual strength of ever more powerful popes. Midway through the twelfth century the procession route from the Lateran to the Colosseum was changed as part of the ritual of accession. A question arose: why the detour? At the moment when the papacy was nearing the zenith of its power, new burlesque elements were brought into play. They--or rather she--would prove enormously flexible and durable.

Part two begins with "Joan the Catholic," an exceptionally important set of chapters, for many assume that the legend of Pope Joan began as a result of Protestant propaganda during the century of the Reformations. Not so. Joan began her career in the *Universal Chronicle of Metz* (ca. 1255), and in the next 200 years her story was repeated in dozens of writings primarily composed by churchmen. Not coincidentally, this was a time during which Joachimite eschatological prophecy (which included a pseudopope) was at its height. Catholics, including such theological luminaries as Étienne de Bourbon, believed Joan had existed, and as Boureau shows, she "embraces a large portion of truth and reality concerning the Middle Ages" (p. 109).

This observation is important, for it situates the event within the context of the medieval universe, a place that was filled with allegory and symbols, or, as Boureau observes: "Étienne de Bourbon places the story within a moral world in which signification is more important than truth" (p. 130). The significations would change, depending on whether the author or relator was Franciscan or Dominican, orthodox or heretical, or in response to contemporary events. Particularly important among the latter were the Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism, for questions of authenticity directly connected the "papess" with doubtful claimants to, or holders of, the Holy See. What better way to get rid of an inconvenient or reforming pope than to cast doubt on the legitimacy of an earlier pope, especially with such a dramatic inversion of social and intellectual roles? But it would be John Wyclif and Jan Hus who first used Joan as a weapon against the Catholic Church, a symbol for decadence and monstrosity. For all intents and purposes, Joan's career as a Catholic ended in 1450. But if her religious underpinnings changed, her "life" would continue to the present.

Chapter five, "The Popess and Her Sisters," examines not only other alleged popesses (Manfreda and Guglielma), but also Joan's propagation and dissemination through a deck of cards: the tarot. The fourth figure in the trump cards is variously called the High Priestess or Popess. As Boureau demonstrates, once she was removed from an ecclesiastical context, literary figures such as Boccaccio began to focus on her ambition, sexuality, disguised femininity, and learning; in short, she became a "troubling figure." Although none of the above characteristics were unusual in religious or secular writings prior to the mid-fifteenth century, their coalescence in a woman as "Christ's representative on earth" was both disturbing, funny, and frequently malicious. At this point, only a few decades before the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, we find the first references to Joan as a "diabolic usurpatrice," a female

perverter of the holy, a witch.

In this chapter one of the most interesting sections is devoted to Joan of Arc. I was struck earlier by the many resemblances--as well as the correlation in time--between Pope Joan and soldier Joan. As Boureau points out, truth can be stranger than fiction, as is evident in the case of Joan of Arc. In every way, the "Maid of Orléans" subverted the social and political order of her day, and was--for various reasons--accepted as genuinely inspired by some of the most cynical leaders and mercenaries of the time. While she proved useful enough for the French to rehabilitate her once their hold on France was firm and she was no longer even a symbolic threat to Charles VII's kingship, to the English she was a "creature in the form of a woman." Yet Joan of Arc was equally enigmatic, for even though the English called her a putain, everyone who knew her well attested to her uncompromised chastity. Both the real and the legendary Joan share more than name and fame: both have inspired countless interpretations over the centuries, and both have been used for every imaginable religious, military, social, and political cause. It is very interesting that two highly influential real women--Joan of Arc and Christine de Pizan--and one imagined one were all at the height of their powers in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. The reasons must be left to others to answer.

Pope Joan arrived on the scene when strong women, primarily but not always religious, were receiving extraordinary attention. This timing may have influenced, positively or negatively, the reception of her "existence." Boureau traces connections between the popess and strong twelfth-century women such as Hildegard of Bingen and Heloïse, not merely the illustrious women of Boccaccio or Christine or heroic women of the Bible and early Christianity. Interestingly, while Boccaccio dealt at length with the greatness and equally ignominious fall of Joan, Christine de Pizan excluded the popess from her writings.

Part three, covering the "Death and Transfiguration of the Popess," covers ground that is more familiar to most academic readers, for with the Reformations came the loss of detachment: Catholics now disavowed her while Lutherans and other Protestants (with a few Calvinist exceptions) used her as a weapon to show the illegitimacy of papal authority. She became a symbol of the Great Whore, for early Protestants a synonym for the Catholic Church. In his *Table Talk*, Luther "remembered" seeing a memorial to Joan in his trip to Rome in 1510, even though his other accounts of that journey are sparse. As studies of preaching have shown, it took some time for the Catholic side to rebut the charges because of discomfort with use of the vernacular and a misunderstanding of the real challenge to the Church, but do so they did eventually, using the vernacular to prove logistically and philologically that Joan had been an invention all along.

In the ensuing centuries, Joan became little more than an object of farce, a "pretext for a ribald fantasy" (p. 263). In revolutionary literature she was even transformed into Azémis, a Turkish woman who schemes with her Turkish lover so that he can win a cardinal's hat. In the century Michel Vovelle has described as a period of *dechristianisation*, Joan had little power to do more than titillate the imagination.

In a *novel* twist, Boureau chooses a bold epilogue, or rather, epilogues. In the first, he uses methods of deconstruction, multiple contextualization, and functional reconstructions to evoke the systems of belief that produced Joan. For if we cannot *know* Joan, we can know what people believed and said about her. In the second epilogue, the author portrays Joan as a "symbolic object," one who polarizes thought through uncertain meaning. That she certainly has done and continues to do.

It is unusual to review a book and find it virtually flawless, yet Boureau's study of the legendary Joan comes very close. It is one of those rare scholarly creations that hooks the reader from the first page, challenges with its erudition and mastery of different disciplines, and makes one laugh out loud. Since too seldom do excellent translators get the credit they deserve, Cochrane must be mentioned again, for without her outstanding translation, the reader could easily miss the nuance and humor of this book. If

there is an area in which the book could be improved, it is only in what Boureau did not do--or perhaps not as fully as he might have. More analysis of the language of the original "Joan texts" would be interesting. They are part of the "Catholic Joan" who was accepted and, one might argue, respected in some interesting ways. If Joan's grand finale was stereotypical of anti-female bias, the portrayal of her prior to her highly regenerative unmasking was also more typical than is usually assumed.

Not unlike the story of a medieval female university student in Poland, Joan is described as surpassing all others in her learning, eloquence, rhetoric, and writing, so much so that she was elected unanimously despite a rather short stay in Rome. Is this simply to make her fall all the more dramatic? That is one possibility, but others remain to be explored. Although the different versions are interspersed with misogynistic comments, the reader almost invariably comes away with a sense that there is no lack of admiration or even awe at Joan's abilities. Is this the polarity posed by Eileen Power and others that supposedly was aimed at women at every clerical turn? Perhaps. But I think Boureau's account offers a much more nuanced reading that, even if not explicitly stated, suggests that we should never take stereotypes as norms; nor should we ever take words out of context. The tales of Joan are rich in a complexity that merits further literary analysis.

Finally, although the book was originally published fifteen years ago, Boureau could have engaged with some of Joan's current fans, who find in the legend of a female pope both possibilities and conspiracies. Perhaps he will do so in a future edition, for the subject is one of timeless fascination. Joan the Popess will live on, becoming whomever and whatever people expect or want from her. Boureau has done the scholarly community an enormous service in this unequalled work of scholarship and analysis. Few scholars would not benefit or learn from this book, and I doubt its appeal will be limited to those within the academy.

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