

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Cossar, Roisin. Clerical Households in Late Medieval Italy

Elena Brizio

Volume 41, Number 2, Spring 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085977ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29854>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brizio, E. (2018). Review of [Cossar, Roisin. Clerical Households in Late Medieval Italy]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(2), 166–168. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29854>

of course, they have the option of going back to Butter's books (i.e., both the 1614/15 *Odyssey* volumes and the 1616 *Whole Works*) in order to gain a sense of the reading experience afforded by the printed text to Chapman's contemporary readership.

In fact, given the scope and erudition of Kendal's critical apparatus, one can only regret that it does not address the early modern reception of the translation (the introduction mainly focuses on the nineteenth century), nor Chapman's place and influence among seventeenth-century translators. Ben Jonson, for instance, celebrated his work and appropriated his imagery of translation as a form of literary metempsychosis. Later seventeenth-century translators, such as Dryden, also enlisted Chapman as a glorious precedent when discussing their own poetics of epic translation. An important complement will be found in Robert Miola's companion edition of Chapman's *Iliad* (MHRA, 2017), which more systematically engages with current scholarship on early modern translation practices and Chapman's place in the literary landscape of his times.

That being said, we should certainly be grateful for Kendal's careful, learned, and illuminating scholarship, which guides us through the twists and turns of the translated text to a fuller understanding and enjoyment of Chapman's English *Odyssey*—thus fulfilling the poet's own wish, as he urged readers of his *Homer, Prince of Poets*, to "love him / (Thus reviv'd) as born in England."

MARIE-ALICE BELLE

Université de Montréal

Cossar, Roisin.

Clerical Households in Late Medieval Italy.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 232. ISBN 978-0-674-97189-9 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

This volume analyzes an aspect of Italian community life in the late Middle Ages that, until now, has been underestimated: the organization of a priest's family life. Over the centuries we have become accustomed to thinking that the celibate religious life is a model that has always been respected and followed;

in fact, medieval priests not only had a personal private life, but in many cases shared it with female companions and children. In order to re-assess this inherited preconception, Roisin Cossar goes back into the archives of northern Italy, and Venice in particular, in order to read the primary sources that describe what a late-medieval priest's life might have been like.

The archival research on which the current volume is based is fundamentally important for several reasons. First, it brings to light first-hand documentation on a reality that might have passed unnoticed by subsequent generations. Second, it allows the author to correct opinions that might be somewhat confused, imprecise, or downright wrong about the facts of medieval Italian life and society. The "archival turn" (7), that is, the use of archival documents to reconstruct history, allows the modern historian to note, directly from the document, the exact terminology used by the notary, to examine the various versions of a single text, and to grasp the dynamics that conditioned the choices the various parties made, their structures, and their functioning in the legal world of the time. The current volume does all this.

Through her examination of notarial documents, wills, and pastoral visitations, the author is able to compare the situation in northern Italy with that in Venice. The picture she draws is that of a clergy, both in the city and in the countryside, that faced poverty. The idea that, because of his social position, the priest was well off or even rich does not always correspond to reality.

The detailed and precise analysis of notarial documents reveals how the notary and his client construct a document that is in line with the expectations both of the individual making the deposition and the society in which that individual lives. The role of the notary, who serves as an intermediary between reality and the law, acquires new importance, especially if we consider that many of the priests studied in this volume were, themselves, notaries.

The documents reveal that medieval priests were, in fact, persons with a private life that included life-partners, children, parents. The range of affections they shared with lay *patres familias* gave meaning to their lives and connected them even more closely to their parishioners. Not surprisingly, the personal family life of many clerics was accepted by the community and unfolded within accepted criteria of form and sociability. As members of the community with powers of *patria potestas*, priests fostered and advanced the careers of their sons, the marriages of their daughters, "and devised strategies to leave property to their dependents" (160).

While fathers and brothers of priests were not problematic for a priest's superiors, children certainly were because they might claim inheritance rights on ecclesiastical benefices. The attention thus paid to a priest's female companion was part of the control mechanisms used by clerical superiors, as was also the technical and legal language that canon law used to fix roles that, in reality, were quite fluid. Archival documents reveal the terminological nuances present in the language and point to a much broader spectrum of meanings than theory allowed. The "apprentices" a priest might list as part of his household could well be his sons, while the "servant" could well be his life-partner and/or the mother to his children. Servants, and even slaves, entered into the description of the priest's family, just as they did in those of the laity.

In most cases, life-partners are mentioned almost in passing and are never described as wives, while children are often just names without any adjective to characterize them. If the priest was a prominent figure in the community because of his position and his culture, the people who lived with him did not always enjoy the same prominence. His female companion was not always as important. A woman was respected as the mother of a priest, not as his life-partner.

In the end, despite the efforts of the senior administration of the church to impose clerical celibacy and enforce a certain ideal of clerical life, a priest was not that different from his parishioners. The image of the licentious, corrupt priest prone to scandal conveyed by literature does not render justice to the vast majority of priests who sought to find a personal equilibrium consisting of affection and of physical and psychological support in situations that were often complex and rendered even more difficult by poverty and tragic events such as plague.

Clear and to the point, this volume will be of interest not only to specialists but also to a more general readership. It offers a new approach to, and innovative insights into, a little-known aspect of Italian society in the late Middle Ages. As such, it will serve as the basis for further analyses, elaborations, and comparisons with other areas of the Italian peninsula.

ELENA BRIZIO

Georgetown University Fiesole Campus