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Bouley, Bradford A. Pious Postmortems: Anatomy, Sanctity, and the Catholic Church in Early Modern Europe

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Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) : Foi, Antiquité et chasse aux sorcières

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des études littéraires et des sciences historiques, qui promettent un avenir florissant à ce domaine de recherche.

OLIVIER SÉGUIN-BRAULT

Université McGill

Bouley, Bradford A.

Pious Postmortems: Anatomy, Sanctity, and the Catholic Church in Early Modern Europe.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. Pp. 214. ISBN 978-0-8122-4957-6 (hardcover) US\$55.

This lucidly written, engaging, and well-researched monograph takes a closer look at the role of medical knowledge and practice in shaping Catholic conceptions of sanctity in the wake of the Reformation. It does so by looking at postmortems performed upon would-be saints during the canonization process. As Bradford Bouley shows, the post-Reformation papacy began requiring these for all canonizations by the seventeenth century. It did so for a number of reasons that situate the construction of the early modern saintly body at the nexus of local politics and piety, a centralizing papacy, religious reform, and new modes of scientific thinking. The central argument of the book is that medical expertise, and in particular the study of anatomy, assumed a special purpose in the context of the Reformation, legitimizing Catholic teachings on the sacred. The engagement of anatomists in canonization processes simultaneously strengthened their claims—and that of the field of anatomy more generally—to scientific authority. Bouley argues that medical practitioners, in the process, developed “new epistemologies” that made them valued experts on the “holy body,” disseminated more broadly through printed descriptions of their autopsies and guidebooks.

The particularities of Bouley’s argument are worked out over the course of five chapters. The first two provide much needed historical context. Chapter 1 touches upon some of the central facets of the canonization process leading up to the Reformation and its increasing formalization during the later sixteenth century. The establishment of the new papal congregations of the Inquisition (1542) and Rites (1588) proved important to strengthening papal scrutiny

over a process that had come under criticism even before the Reformation, and under intense criticism in the wake of the division of the western church after 1517. In this context, ecclesiastical officials turned increasingly to other experts in their investigations of claims to holiness, including craftsman and medical practitioners. Chapter 2 looks more closely at papal reliance upon postmortems during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Spanish canon lawyer Francisco Peña played a particularly important and early role in promoting this practice, using his office as deacon of the papal Tribune of the Rota to demand the consultation of medical experts for new canonization processes. Bouley argues that Peña “helped make the medically verified holy body a key miracle for any potential saint.”

The remaining three chapters look up close at the practice of postmortems in canonization processes in the tridentine church. Chapter 3 considers one of the most important and controversial kinds of evidence typically relied upon in cases of sanctity—the “incorruption” of the body. Bouley argues that Catholic teachings on original sin and belief in bodily resurrection laid the ideological foundations for papal resort to medical expertise. The incorrupt corpse, as he notes, “provided a glimpse of the resurrection and the victory over death and decay that the elect would enjoy.” Measuring incorruption became one important responsibility of the medical expert, who physically probed the body in pursuit of signs of the natural or unnatural at work. Here Bouley deftly illuminates the multiple and competing influences shaping the determinations of the experts brought in to perform the autopsies on would-be saints, including local piety, papal interest in promoting the cult of saints, and the professional demands placed upon medical practitioners. Medical practitioners struggled at times to satisfy multiple constituencies, and not always successfully, but as Bouley also shows, they were often devout Catholics and receptive to reading bodies for evidence of sanctity. Bouley makes an important argument here, that by involving themselves in postmortems, these practitioners enhanced the status of their own profession and personal claims to expertise while shaping the process of canonization itself. They did so by developing procedures and publishing the results, providing guides for future investigators.

Chapter 4 looks in turn at evidence of extreme bodily suffering. Evidence of extreme suffering testified to an ascetic lifestyle, or to a forbearance of suffering that was itself a marker of sanctity. As in cases claiming “incorruption,” it was also challenged by Protestant reformers as evidence of sanctity. For

papal leaders, reinterpreting asceticism and extreme suffering as “heroic virtue” became one way to mitigate this criticism, along with a greater display of scepticism and a thorough examination of the body. Kidney stones were, it seems, a relatively common form of suffering shared by would-be ascetic saints including Pius V, Ignatius Loyola, and the Florentine Dominican tertiary Caterina Ricci (d. 1590). Medical practitioners considered the dissection of the kidneys particularly effective for identifying demonstrable evidence of sanctity. As Bouley makes clear, however, physical signs of suffering “did not stand on their own merit,” and were mostly relied upon in canonization cases that were considered worthy of promotion by the church hierarchy.

Whereas chapter 4 is preoccupied mostly with the construction of the “ascetic prelate” as a saintly model, chapter 5 turns to the very different treatment of the bodies of female ascetic saints. Here he argues that by the seventeenth century, “only men could have their asceticism verified through autopsy.” Moreover, the postmortem of women focused upon genitalia, while for men it instead focused upon their “absence or diminutive appearance.” The expertise of male medical practitioners, in consequence, through the practice of postmortems, served to reaffirm gender hierarchies, undermining in the process an older, more “gender-fluid” conception of saintliness. Much in line with the excellent scholarship of Katharine Park among many others, Bouley’s *Pious Postmortems* helps to dispel any lingering conception of church resistance to anatomical investigation during the early modern period. It highlights, quite to the contrary, a fruitful partnership between an institution faced with serious challenges to its traditional claims to spiritual authority, and a field of scientific investigation that was growing in sophistication as it embraced new methodologies of knowledge acquisition and production.

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