

The Female Pope, a Mutilated Manuscript, and Some Bibliographical Puzzles

Was there ever a female Pope? Accounts of the notorious ‘Pope Joan’ first appear in the thirteenth century, most influentially in a version of the *Chronicle of Popes and Emperors* written by Martin of Poland (‘Martinus Polonus’, also known as Martin of Opava, the town in today’s Czech Republic, ‘Troppau’ in German).¹ Martin was a Dominican friar who was named Archbishop of Gniezno, but died in 1278 on the way to his new See. Martin’s account related how one early Pope John was really Pope Joan, a woman, who as a girl had been dressed as a man by a lover of hers in order to disguise her identity. She studied in Athens as a man, and still as a man taught in Rome, drawing large audiences. As a result she was elected Pope, but as she was still sexually involved with her old lover, she became pregnant, and was unexpectedly delivered of a child while in formal procession near the San Clemente, somewhere between the Colosseum and Saint John of Lateran. This is the reason why Popes will never use that street.

Martin’s account of the female Pope was repeated with little variation by many subsequent chroniclers, and his history also fixed the conventional chronology of Pope Joan for future commentators: she was said to have sat in Peter’s otherwise homosocial Chair between the reigns of Leo IV and Benedict III, who are held today to have died and succeeded, respectively, in 855 AD. So Pope Joan, in the tradition stemming from Martin of Poland, was a ninth-century Pope. ‘Sat in the Chair’ is also apposite—later accounts of Pope Joan generated the famous story that the Pope is enthroned on a chair with a hole in the bottom, through which a cardinal is required ceremonially to grasp the new Pope’s testicles, in order to prove that the holy father is in fact a man: ‘Lest they should be deceived againe, they make prooffe by feeling; and he that feeleth makes it knowne by crying out; We haue a man Pope’.² The existence of Pope Joan also received influential confirmation at the hands of the fourteenth-century Italian writer Boccaccio, whose *De mulieribus claris* (‘On famous women’) included Joan among his Famous Women. In the college’s copy of this work (Bern, 1539) she is Famous Woman No. 99, illustrated by a notorious engraving of her sudden parturition *in via*.

The existence or otherwise of Pope Joan exploded into controversy in the sixteenth-century Reformation. For now Protestants had a story of a female Pope and proof of the inherent, almost comical mendacity of the papacy; and Roman Catholics, conversely, had to argue that not only had there never been such a figure as Pope Joan, but that they had denied it all along, Reformation or no Reformation.

In Oxford, the most famous (inevitably Protestant) book on Pope Joan was written by a fellow of University College, one Alexander Cooke, and published in 1610. Cooke rehearsed earlier English controversies over Joan, as we will see, but his was the first English book to be dedicated entirely to the topic. Following a popular literary convention of the time, Cooke cast his text as a dialogue between a ‘Papist’ (PAP) and a ‘Protestant’ (PRO). Cooke was a Calvinist, fiercely anti-Catholic, and his book on the female Pope—he unsurprisingly maintained that the story of Joan was genuine—was republished in 1625, again in 1675, and was translated into Latin (not uncommon) and also French (uncommon).³

¹ My thanks to Jan Machielsen, Lecturer in History, New College, for pointing out to me the passage in Alexander Cooke on which this note turns, and for pursuing Colonna to the Vatican (see below).

² In the words of the fifteenth-century Byzantine historian Laonicus Chalcondyles, as reported by Cooke, *Pope Joane* (1625 ed.), p. 8.

³ There is a copy in the Bodleian of the 1625 edition (A 3.13 Linc.) once owned by that righteous anti-papist Thomas Barlow, Bodley’s librarian from 1652-60, Lady Margaret professor of divinity from 1660, President of Queen’s from 1657, and Bishop of Lincoln from 1675. Barlow purchased this book in 1634; and he has, as was his wont, covered his copy with annotations in pencil and in ink in his characteristic

Now Alexander Cooke in the course of his short but learned book makes two references to texts specifically in New College library. It was increasingly common in such polemical writing to cite exact texts with their locations, usually to make a point about fraudulence, forgery, or just one's own thoroughgoing, walkabout scholarship. But how accurate was Cooke? It is these two references I want to unpick here, in order to answer that question.



The Pope Gives Birth: from Giovanni Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris* (Bern, 1539)
New College Library, Oxford, BT1.128.23(2), fp. LXXIII^v.

I.

Cooke's first reference to a New College book involves apparent censorship. The story of Joan, he says, was once present in one of the college's manuscripts, but has been excised by some nervous Roman Catholic, concerned to erase all trace of the female Pope:

... this story of Pope *Ioane* is cut out of a very faire Manuscript of *Ranulfus Cestrensis*, which is to be seene at this day in the library of New Colledge in *Oxford*. (p. 42)

Annotations in Cooke's margin state that 'this day' was in 1606 (so his book was written at least four years before it was finally published); and that the passage in question was to be found in book five of 'Ranulphus Cestrensis'. Now 'Ranulphus' or 'Ranulfus Cestrensis' is the fourteenth-century Benedictine monk and chronicler Ralph Higden (d. 1364), whose *Polychronicon* was immensely popular in its time, surviving today in more than one hundred manuscripts. There were several contemporary versions of the chronicle, and it was continued after Higden's death by various hands. In the 1380s, a translation into English of the *Polychronicon* was made by John Trevisa; and a second,

spiky hand. Into the opening pages are crammed further references to texts on the story of Pope Joan; interestingly, these also include Higden's *Polychronicon* (on which see below), cited by Barlow from a Bodleian manuscript.

PAP.: Is this storie torne (indeed) out of *Ranulfus Cestrensis* in New Colledge in *Oxford*? Who thinke you was so mad?

PROT.: Why, who but a Papist? For do not they giue direction, that . . . such things should be altered or put out, which tend to the discredite of the Clergie? And doth not this touch at quicke their Ecclesiasticall state? Doth not *Posseuine* aduise, that the note in *Iohn Neuisan* the Lawyer, which mentioneth Pope *Ioane*, should be razed out? . . . Blot it out, or rend it out, quoth *Posseuine*: for it is but a fiction, and a forgery.

The problem with this interpretation is that this is not the only excision in this manuscript. As James Willoughby has established in his account of this manuscript, at some point it suffered the excision of *several* whole pages, as well as many illuminated capitals. If we turn to the opening of the third book of Higden's work, we find that that page has been cut out too, and likewise for the page that once contained the opening of the fourth book. Books two, five, and seven have only had their illuminated initial capitals cut out, in some instances with a crude attempt to glue back together the pages beneath the local excision, where the knife has cut down into the underlying folios too. Only the opening of the first book is intact, presumably because it was too obvious a scene for such a crime. And when we re-examine the 'Pope Joan' excision we realise that the page thus excised was the opening page of book six. So, other than the first book, all the other books in the text have been mutilated precisely at their decorated beginnings. We are obviously dealing here with someone who was cutting into this manuscript to remove the prettiest pages—nothing more ideologically complex.

And yet this is perhaps not the end of the matter. When our manuscripts were catalogued in the mid-nineteenth century by Henry Coxe, he made no mention of any mutilation in this particular manuscript. We also have many other mutilated manuscripts where illuminated capitals have been cleanly cut out, and it is the current opinion in the library that a great deal of this vandalism happened in the late Victorian period, and was perpetrated most probably by wicked college fellows making Christmas cards, or some similar activity. Therefore were it not for the testimony of Cooke we would have assumed that the sorry state of this manuscript today was the result of blades wielded in the last century and a half. Now several of the excisions of solely capitals do look like they may have been modern interventions—their edges are clean, and, as has been said, the practice can be paralleled in other manuscripts in the collection. It therefore seems as if *either* the manuscript was plundered for its illuminations some time before 1606 (and Coxe failed to record this); *or* it was only partially plundered in that period, and *further* mutilated at some time in the later nineteenth or twentieth century. The only thing that is certain is that the excision of the entire page commencing book six must have taken place before Cooke's time.

So Cooke was right but for the wrong reasons, it seems: Pope Joan has been removed from this manuscript—but probably because her story backed onto a particularly nice piece of manuscript illumination. The one tiny vellum tendril of doubt, however, as James Willoughby remarks to me, is that the 'Pope Joan' excision has indeed left a stub with bits of painted decoration on it, a rather messy job if one were after the page for its artistic thrill rather than its text. It is just possible that the 'Pope Joan' page, with its unkind cut, *was* excised because of its text, and that a much later vandal saw the loss of the illumination, reasoned that he may as well take a few more, and got to work on several of the other leaves. For the other leaves were cut clean right down to the gutter, unlike the 'Pope Joan' cut. But this is all speculation.

II.

Cooke's second reference to a New College book is less exciting and even more of a bibliographical headache—but one that will be resolved by the introduction of some very beautiful books. Here is the relevant exchange:

PAP: . . . For whereas you say *Onuphrius* was the first who by reason sought to discredit the report of it [i.e. Pope Joan]: that is not so. *Iohannes de Columna* a good writer of Chronicles, long before *Onuphrius*, hath likewise vtterly reiected the vanitie of this fable as *D. Harding* noteth.

PRO: *Iohannes de Columna* his historie is extant in Lattine in the Vniuersitie library at Oxford: and in French, in New Colledge library. But there is not one word, good, or bad, for, or against Pope *Ioane* in it. If he reiected it, he reiected it by silence. (pp. 4-5)

The 'Papist' is referring, first, to the Roman Catholic scholar and Augustinian monk Onuphrius Panvinius, whose commentary on the fifteenth-century scholar Bartolomeo Platina's *Lives of the Popes* contained a well-referenced debunking of the myth of Pope Joan.⁵ The 'Protestant'—Cooke's position, of course—had claimed that it was only from the time of Panvinius that Roman Catholics felt the need to deny the existence of Pope Joan, the implication being that it was only the Protestant Reformation that had forced them, falsely, to do so. The 'Papist', in response, counters that one 'Johannes de Columna' had denied Pope Joan long before, and—as long as this Columna is a *pre*-Reformation writer—then the case that the Roman Catholic Church only denied Pope Joan *after* the Reformation collapses.

So who is Johannes de Columna? He was a real writer, a thirteenth-century Dominican responsible for a world chronicle called the *Mare historiarum* or 'Sea of Histories'. Cooke had, as he states through his 'Papist', read about this text in a work by the recusant Thomas Harding, his *Confutation of . . . An Apologie of the Church of England*, published in Antwerp in 1565. Now Thomas Harding (1516-72), it so happens, had been a fellow of New College too, and one of the more prominent scholars of his time. In 1542 he had been appointed Regius Professor of Hebrew, but after some flirtation with Protestant views, he reaffirmed his orthodoxy under the reign of Mary, and then fled abroad upon the accession of Elizabeth. He was one of the predominantly Wykehamist set of 'Anglico-Lovanienses', a band of scholars concentrated in Louvain who fought the new religion from abroad. Harding was both celebrated and notorious for his attack on John Jewel's official *Apologia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* of 1562—Jewel's is the work against which Harding's *Confutation* was directed.

Now Harding indeed makes the claim that Cooke repeated, but his original statement is given without any further reference. Cooke's comment on the libraries where the text can be found is thus original to him.⁶ Jewel too had not mentioned Colonna, and therefore no libraries in which he could be found.

The problem is that Cooke seems to have got the wrong book. Harding is presumably referring to the genuine Colonna and his *Mare historiarum*, even if he does not mention the work by name. But this was an exceptionally rare text. It existed in hardly any manuscripts, and even in the early eighteenth century the bibliographers of the

⁵ See Panvinius's edition of Platina at BT3.31.2(2), comments in the life of John VIII (i.e. Pope Joan), pp. 120-23. Platina accepts Joan as a 106th Pope; Panvinius's long annotation, the fruit of extensive labours in the Vatican Library, insists that it is all simply a fable. The New College copy is one of several books from John Prime, professor of theology, given 1596 (see the Benefactors' Book, p. 42).

⁶ John Harding, *A Confutation of . . . An Apologie of the Church of England* [of John Jewel] (Antwerp, 1565), fps. 164r-67r on Pope Joan, reference to Colonna on fp. 166v.

Dominican order could only locate two complete manuscript texts, both in Paris. Modern writers can add two Italian ones to this, and there was also indeed a translation into a vernacular language—but into Castilian, not French, as Cooke had claimed. This translation was published in 1512 in Spain; and there was no available Latin printed edition to which Cooke could turn.⁷ I have not established how Harding knew this text, and my guess is that he did not, but was simply repeating a claim about it from a prior source (but not the annotations of Panvinus, it seems). I am certain that Cooke could not have read Colonna—even today, there is no full edition.⁸ We can detect that there is a problem here just from how Cooke’s ‘Protestant’ replies—his interlocutor, repeating Harding, claims that Colonna ‘vterly reiected’ the story of Pope Joan; whereas the ‘Protestant’ claims that Colonna did not mention the story at all! But Cooke had clearly researched the problem, and had come up with a Latin and a French text, the former in the Bodleian, the latter in New College. How can he have been holding a text otherwise untraced in England and moreover in an additional language into which it had seemingly not been translated?

The solution to the puzzle is this. Renaissance scholars knew that Colonna had written a book called *Mare historiarum*. They knew this because it had been listed in a standard bibliography of the time, the Abbot Trithemius’s *De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis*.⁹ But almost no-one could have seen the actual text. Then, in 1488-89, a book appeared in Paris, a sumptuous publication in two volumes, entitled *La Mer des Histoires*—same title, but now in French. This, to confuse matters even further, was a geographical-historical compendium which was also a world chronicle, like Colonna’s text: you can look up the Popes, and indeed you will find the ninth-century Popes around the time when Joan was supposed to have been one of their number. But you will not find Joan. This is because *La Mer des Histoires* was not a translation of the *Mare historiarum* but instead of an anonymous Latin compendium originally published in Lübeck in 1475, only two decades after printing by moveable type itself had been established by Gutenberg in Mainz—the very city in which Pope Joan, incidentally, was said to have been born. This was the *Rudimentum novitiorum* (‘Rudiments for Novices’), a landmark book, a huge, deluxe tome boasting more than 150 woodcuts, and featuring two important world maps. But it proved more popular in its French translation, which was frequently republished.¹⁰

Now this is the book Cooke mistakes for the actual Colonna chronicle. It was indeed available in Latin in the Bodleian in its 1475 Latin edition,¹¹ and it was indeed

⁷ Jacques Quetif and Jacques Echard, eds., *Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1719), vol. 1, pp. 418-20; S. L. Forte, ‘John Colonna O. P. Life and Writings (1298-c. 1340)’, *Archivum fratrum praedicatorum* 20 (1950), pp. 369-414, pp. 394-402 on the bibliography of the *Mare*.

⁸ Indeed, it seems the whole claim may be false: Jan Machielsen has inspected one of the copies in the Vatican and assures me that Leo IV is there succeeded by Benedict III with no Pope Joan in the interim—when and by whom the claim connecting Colonna and Pope Joan was made remain mysteries.

⁹ New College acquired two copies of this work within a few years: Johannes Trithemius, *Liber de scriptoribus ecclesiasticis* ([Basel], [1494]), BT1.59.12, from John Prime again (entry on Columna at p. 80r; this copy has itself undergone some slight Protestant censorship, as ‘papa’ has been struck out and replaced by merely ‘episcopus’ in a few dozen cases in the contents pages); and the edition of Cologne, 1546, BT3.3.6, was given by Thomas Martin in 1588 (see p. 226 for Columna, and for Martin see the Benefactors’ Book, p. 39-40 and the Note on his gifts in [New College Notes 4 \(2013\), no. 3](#)).

¹⁰ For more on the work see the *Brill Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle* (Leiden, 2010), s.n. ‘Rudimentum Novitiorum’. In the original text of 1475, the world chronicle does go up to the present, but upon the death of Leo IV (treated as Leo V) Benedict III succeeds without any mention of Pope Joan. He sits for two years and five months and is succeeded by Nicholas I.

¹¹ The Bodleian copy referred to by Cooke is undoubtedly the copy now shelved as Auct. 7 Q 1.1—see Bodleian Incunabula Catalogue, R-142. That it was in the library at this point is proved by Thomas James, *Catalogus* (Oxford, 1605), p. 300, where it is listed simply as ‘*Chronicon permagnum distrib. in 6. ætates. 1475*’.

available in New College in its 1487 French edition.¹² (The Bodleian at this point did not have the French text; nor New College the Latin.) But the French text, as mentioned, had been published in *two* volumes, of which New College only has the first, and unless the second has subsequently disappeared, then Cooke cannot have checked the New College text in person, as it was in the second book that he would have failed to find Joan among the Popes: our copy, volume one, only goes as far as the ‘fourth age’ of the world, ending chronologically on a discussion of the biblical Zadok and the pagan Seven Sages. So Cooke was tripped up, probably on an inherited mistake, and the ‘real’ *Mare historiarum* (referred to by Harding) was confounded with the *Mer des histoires*, actually a translation of a quite different text, the *Rudimentum novitiorum*—which was in its turn by back-extrapolation seemingly attributed by some to Johannes de Columna.¹³ In the *Mare*, Harding had, so he claimed, encountered a refutation of Pope Joan; in the *Mer*, Cooke encountered no mention of Joan at all.



La Mer des Histoires, New College Library, Oxford, BT1.47.1 (1488-89, first volume only), hand-coloured opening page

How did Cooke know about these books? I have suggested that he did not in fact look at the New College volume of ‘Columna’, for if he had, he would have realized that it was only half the text, and the wrong half at that. And it is plausible that he was

¹² The New College book is BT1.47.1 (1488-89, first volume only, colophon of Paris: Pierre Le Rouge, July 1488). This is a wonderful, hand-illuminated volume. See Dennis E. Rhodes, *A Catalogue of Incunabula in All the Libraries of Oxford University Outside the Bodleian* (Oxford, 1982), no. 1535.

¹³ Quetif and Echard warn against the error, suggesting that it was current.

just repeating something he had heard about the Higden manuscript, as he is evidently unaware of the larger mutilation of that volume. Was there a middle-man in New College? If so, we need not seek far. One possibility is the Warden himself, George Ryves (1569-1613), a man with good scholarly anti-papist credentials, and an interest in books, as we have seen in a previous Note.¹⁴ But the more obvious man is Thomas James, Bodley's first librarian, an avid anti-Catholic bibliographer, and a fellow of New College who had catalogued the manuscripts as part of his 1600 union catalogue of Oxford and Cambridge manuscripts, the *Ecloga Oxonio-Cantabrigensis*. Who better placed to inform Cooke that Harding's 'Columna' was the man who had written the book translated as the *Mer des histoires*, available in Latin in one of his libraries and in French in the other? Who better to exploit a seeming piece of censorship in a New College manuscript?¹⁵ And James already had a track-record of spotting supposed corruptions in college manuscripts, including those in his own college.¹⁶ Add to this the crucial biographical detail that Cooke's elder brother Robert, sometime of Brasenose College, was author of the *Censura quorundam scriptorium* (1614), yet another collection of alleged Roman Catholic corruptions in the texts of the Fathers, and loudly heralded by James—we are dealing here with a network of Oxonians on the look-out for any evidence that might bespeak papist tampering.¹⁷ But regardless of who exactly told Cooke about these books, the specific conclusions he came to from his information were, however understandably, however attractively, wrong.

William Poole
Fellow Librarian



A hand-coloured capital from the college's *La Mer des Histoires*

¹⁴ See '[An Early-Modern New College Dynasty: George, Thomas, and Bruno Ryves](#)' in *New College Notes* 4 (2013), no. 1, and the [follow-up in the next issue](#).

¹⁵ James mentioned his awareness of a Higden MS, but the one in Balliol College, in a work of 1625 (James, *Manduction* (Oxford, 1625), sg. T2r).

¹⁶ Thomas James, *A Treatise of the Corruption of Scripture, Councils, and Fathers* (London, 1612), e.g. Part 2, pp. 23, 83 for use of two New College Cyprians; p. 53 for two copies of the *Opus imperfectum* on Matthew; pp. 89, 96 for two copies of Gratian's *Decretals*. Note also Part 3, p. 43, where James records that George Ryves himself handed James for the Bodleian Library a captured manuscript copy of a Spanish apology by the editor of the Antwerp Polyglot, Arias Montanus, taken at the sack of Cadiz. I have not located this manuscript.

¹⁷ James, *A Treatise of the Corruption of Scripture, Councils, and Fathers*, Part 4, p. 25; Part 5, p. 2.