

Thomas Stapleton's Copy of Sigebert of Gembloux's Chronicle (1513)

2025, a Holy Year of Jubilee for the Church, has been a year marked by Pope Francis's death on Easter Monday, following the Holy Father's final public Easter address on Easter Sunday. Much of the world, religious and secular alike, was then transfixed by the ensuing conclave, the ancient, ceremonial, inspired, and secret ballot of cardinals to elect a new pope, Pope Leo XIV, who now occupies the seat of St Peter. An election lacking the seeming inefficiency and tawdriness of many other election processes these days, the conclave took place in the wake of the October 2024 theatre release of Edward Berger's Oscar-nominated, BAFTA-award winning film *Conclave*, which is based on the 2016 novel by Robert Harris, whose content has so invited comparisons with popular perceptions of Pope Francis's papacy. And *Conclave*, with its sensationalist—one might say '*dea ex machina*'—denouement, has once again brought back into public consciousness the myth of Pope Joan, a perennial old chestnut. Engrossing, superbly acted, and cinematographically beautiful as this excellent film is, it nevertheless entirely unconvincingly skirts around the issue that the fictional pope elected, Innocent IV, is both unqualified to become pope, and very far from 'innocent' of an extraordinary deception—just as, indeed, the legendary 'Pope Joan' was.¹ So, who was Pope Joan?

Said to have hailed from Mainz in Germany, and born to English parents, a 13th-century legend has it that Joan (as she is most often named), an adolescent female disguised as a man, journeyed with her lover to Athens, where she received an outstanding education. Masquerading still as a man, she later goes to Rome, where, acclaimed for her excellent learning, she ascends to the Seat of St Peter in 855 with the title Pope John VIII, serving as pope for around two-and-half years. Suppositiously, her reign is brought to an end, as is her life, when near the San Clemente church she is unmasked and exposed indubitably, after publicly giving birth and dying almost instantly, during a papal procession between the basilicas of St Peter's and St John Lateran. What is perhaps *unsurprising* about all of this, however, is that 16th-century Protestants, including Martin Luther and Jean Calvin, appropriated this myth of a 9th-century popess, with its tale of fallibility and immorality, to bring the Catholic Church into disrepute, purposefully to discredit what is the Church's uninterrupted papal line of apostolic succession back to St Peter. Only—Pope Joan never existed: Pope Clement VIII (1536–1605) decreed the legend categorically false, and a 1647 thesis by the French Protestant historian David Blondel thoroughly dismantled it, as has subsequent research.²

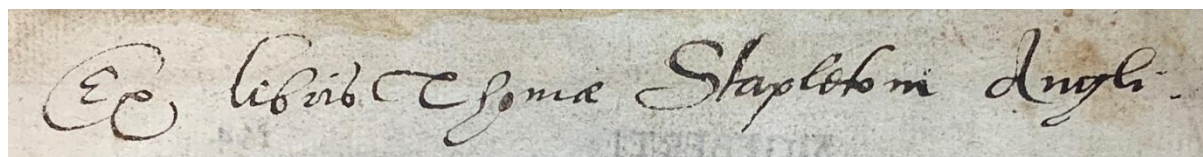
Scholars have since drawn attention to the Pope Joan legend in relation to, among others, two great Catholic luminaries, the Benedictine monk and historian Sigebert of Gembloux (c. 1026–1112), and the exiled theology professor—and New College, Oxford fellow—Thomas Stapleton (1535–1598). Now we have these two Catholic theologians unequivocally aligned in a major purchase for New College Library, a fine copy of a notable post-incunabulum acquired in June of this year, with a very telling provenance: Sigebert of Gembloux's *Chronicon* in its 1513 Paris imprint, bearing Thomas Stapleton's ownership signature and annotations.³

¹ Brad Miner, 'He's Just a Girl Who Can't Say "No!": A Review of *Conclave*', *The Catholic Thing* (25 October 2024): <www.thecatholicthing.org/2024/10/25/hes-just-a-girl-who-cant-say-no-a-review-of-conclave/> (Accessed: 8 July 2025).

² Useful assessments of the Pope Joan legend include: Jan Machielsen, 'The Myth of Pope Joan', in *The Cambridge History of the Papacy: Volume II: The Governance of the Church* ed. Joëlle Rollo-Koster, Robert A. Ventresca, Melodie H. Eichbauer, and Miles Pattenden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), pp. 221–45; Thomas F. X. Noble, 'Why Pope Joan?', *The Catholic Historical Review* 99 (2013), 219–38; and Barbara Sher Tinsley, 'Pope Joan Polemic in Early Modern France: The Use and Disabuse of Myth', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987), 381–98.

³ *Sigeberti Gemblacensis coenobitae Chronicon ab anno 381 ad 1113: cum insertionibus ex historia Galfridi & additionibus Roberti abbatis Montis centu[m] & tres sequen[tes] a[n]nos co[m]plectentibus promoue[n]te egregio Patre D.G. Paruo, doctore theologo, co[n]fessore regio: nunc primu[m] in lucem emissum* (Paris: Henri Estienne and Jean Petit, 1 June 1513), New College Library, Oxford, BT1.83.14.

Born probably near Gembloux, 70 km from Liège (to whose prince bishopric Gembloux belonged), Sigebert was admitted as an oblate to the episcopal abbey school of Saint-Pierre at Gembloux, under the Benedictine abbacy of Olbert (*d.* 1048). In the early 1050s he was appointed scholaster at the monastery of Saint-Vincent in Metz, where he began writing lives of the saints, and remained for around 20 years. After returning to Gembloux in the early 1070s, from about 1086 onwards, using the fine library collections of Metz and Gembloux, he began to compile his *magnum opus*, the Chronicle (*Chronica universalis* or *Chronicon sive Chronographia*), which is known to have drawn upon over 70 different verified sources. A chronological world history, covering the period 381 to 1084 in Sigebert's first version (completed 1106)—and extending up to 1111 in his second revised one (the year before his death)—it commences at the point where the universal chronicle composed in *c.* 380 by St Jerome concludes, a work which was itself an expansion and translation into Latin of the Greek chronicle written *c.* 311 by Eusebius of Caesarea. Research affirms 65 manuscript copies of Sigebert's work produced from the 12th to the 16th centuries, the majority of which are known to be extant, attesting to the Chronicle's considerable popularity and influence throughout the medieval period.⁴



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.83.14, p. 164v
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Our newly acquired copy of Sigebert's *Chronicon* (1513) bears on p. 164v the inscription 'Ex libris Thomae Stapletoni Angli', as well as manuscript marginalia to 33 pages of the book—some also in Stapleton's hand and some in another as yet unidentified 16th-century hand. (There is at least one other book in Oxford with Stapleton's *ex libris* inscription: his copy of *De Sacramentis* (1576) gifted to him by its author, Cardinal William Allen (1532–1594), who established in Douai, Flanders in 1568 the Collège des Prêtres Anglais—to which Stapleton would eventually leave his library of books and manuscripts—a town in which Stapleton took up residence in 1569.)⁵ Our book also carries former ownership marks (ink stamps, paper shelfmark labels, and pencilled shelfmark) of the library of Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, the illustrious Catholic school first established in 1593 in Saint-Omer (40 km from Calais) to educate the sons of recusant families, deprived of a Catholic education in Elizabethan England. The world's oldest continually active Jesuit school, its library would have been a fitting home for a book once owned by Thomas Stapleton, who had entered the Jesuit Order in Douai in 1584, remaining there for almost two years. The book is today encased in a 19th-century binding of calfskin over boards (a watermark dated 1858 is visible on the lower board pastedown). It is the most notable early printed book New College Library has acquired for some time, arriving in the library just a few months after likewise

⁴ Jeroen Deploige, 'Sigebert of Gembloux', in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle Online*, ed. Graeme Dunphy (15 April 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1163/2213-2139_emc_SIM_02314> (Accessed: 8 July 2025), and Peter Verbist, 'Sigebert of Gembloux (*d.* 1112)', *Duelling with the Past: Medieval Authors and the Problem of the Christian Era (c. 990–1135)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 173–237, provide informative accounts of Sigebert of Gembloux's life. For useful considerations of the Chronicle, I am grateful to two authors for sharing with me drafts of their soon-to-be published books: Gabriele Passabi, *Robert of Torigni's Chronography and the Universal Chronicle Tradition* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, forthcoming), and Eric W. S. Wolever, *North, South, East and West in Twelfth-Century Thought* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, forthcoming).

⁵ William Allen, *Gulielmi Alani Angli, Regij Sacrae Theologiae Professoris in Academia Duacensi. Libri très, id est, De sacramentis in genere, De sacramento eucharistiae, De sacrificio eucharistiae* (Antwerp: John Fowler, 1576), Heythrop Library at Campion Hall, Oxford, BT1234 ALL 1576, title-page. This book was also formerly owned by Stonyhurst College Library.

our foremost manuscript acquisition in recent years, an exquisite, illuminated 15th-century copy of the Letters of St Jerome.⁶

In Sigebert of Gembloux's printed *Chronicon* we find 'Joānes papa Anglicus' ('English Pope John') recorded in language ('it is rumoured') that hedges its bets about Pope Joan's biological sex:

Fama est hunc Ioannē foeminam fuisse:& vni soli familiari tantum cognitam:qui eā complexus est/et grauis facta peperit/papa existens. quare eam inter pontifices non numerant quidam: ideo nomini numerum nō facit.⁷

It is rumoured that this John was a woman, and known as such only to one companion, who embraced her and made her pregnant. She gave birth while Pope. Therefore certain people do not count her among the popes, for which reason she does not bear a number to her name.

Only—Sigebert never wrote this; it is absent from the oldest manuscripts of his work, but appears in marginal interpolations to later manuscript copies. But what a yarn! and so readily wielded for various viewpoints today; little wonder it lives on.

Some seven centuries after her purported papacy, poor hapless Joan was appropriated for Protestant Reformation polemic that Thomas Stapleton confutes in his *A Counterblast to M. Hornes Vayne Blaste Against M. Fekenham* (1567). Stapleton's longest English book, it is a defence of John Feckenham (c. 1510–1584) against his adversary Robert Horne, bishop of Winchester, who held Feckenham in custody at Winchester; the kindly, obdurately faithful Feckenham was the last abbot of Westminster Abbey, and Mary I's confessor, remembered chiefly for ministering to Lady Jane Grey before her execution, and interceding to gain Princess Elizabeth's release from imprisonment and ensure her life. A telling passage of rhetoric in the *Counterblast*, to which our sometime New College fellow, Jan Machielsen, also adeptly refers, shows a Thomas Stapleton who refuses to pussyfoot around when he references Joan, and the Church of England's supreme governance.⁸ Stapleton here criticises the notion that (in his view) so motley and unholy a family trinity of king (Henry VIII), boy king (Edward VI), and queen (Elizabeth I) might each be *princely* head of a church (the Church of England), and in so short a time span after its foundation—compared to the Catholic church's already 1,500-year history—and, indeed, of a church whose members see fit to disparage the Catholic church on the basis of the Church's once having had, in its very long history, one *spiritual* female head, or pope (which it hadn't):

Then is M. Horne in hand with Benedictus the. 3. nexte Pope to the woman Pope Iohan: who was confirmed by the Emperour. But here M. Horne, a man may doubt of this pointe, whether this Benedictus was next to Pope Iohan. For it here was neuer such Pope Iohan, then could not he be nexte to her. And that it is rather a fable then a storie, for al your great busines, your Apologie, and others, make therein, I thinke it hath ben already sufficiently proued. Neither nede you to make so much wondering at the matter. Except ye list to wonder at your selues, whiche doe place the Popes Supreme authoritie in Princes, be they men, or women: Yea and chyl dren to. And in so fewe years you haue had all three. Man. Childe. And Woman. The lesse meruaile had it bene, if in so many hundred yeres, we had had one woman pope, which yet as I sayed, is vtterly false: as it hath bene sufficiently proued.⁹

What should we make of this?

⁶ Christopher Skelton-Foord, 'The Restitution of St Jerome: New College Library's MS 384', *New College Notes* 23 (2025), no. 4.

⁷ *Sigeberti Gemblacensis coenobitae Chronicon*, p. 66v.

⁸ Machielsen, 'Myth of Pope Joan', 234.

⁹ Thomas Stapleton, *A Counterblast to M. Hornes Vayne Blaste against M. Fekenham* (Leuven: John Fowler, 1567), p. 254.

For sure, Stapleton was an intellectual powerhouse with remarkable scholastic credentials. The epithet 'the most learned R. Catholick of all his time' the *Athenæ Oxonienses* accorded him is now proverbial; his output was voluminous: around five million words in Latin and a million in English.¹⁰ Chief among Catholic theologians, he pulled no punches in his verbal confrontations with Protestant apologists in order, as he saw it, to root out all heresy, as typified by this forthright exchange with the Puritan master of St John's College, Cambridge, William Whitaker (1547/8–1595) in 1592. In Thomas Stapleton's view, Protestant controversialists' giving pride of place to their own individual interpretations of Scripture above those of the Church constituted acts of serious error, and he calls them out as such:

I find it shameful and disgusting, Whitaker, that in this one section of your book you have sinned so much, told so many lies, made so many paralogisms, contradicted yourself and refuted yourself so often, fabricated so many foolish, impudent, and impious charges, and, in short proved yourself to be so perfidious, lazy, and ignorant an opponent. You claim you want to debate with the papists of our day, with Robert Bellarmine and myself, to discuss Sacred Scripture, the number of its books, its authentic editions, its authority, its interpretation, its perfection. Let me warn you, you have chosen adversaries who do not lack perception and who, in this wrestling in controversy, are not easily knocked about.¹¹

Stapleton's knowledge of Scripture, patristics, and biblical scholarship was outstanding, and it was a feat for any to dispute against him on theological matters. Born just months after Henry VIII had made himself supreme head of a newly established Church of England, Thomas Stapleton grew up in an England inhospitable to faithful Catholics. Schooled first at the Canterbury School—refounded in 1541 as The King's School, following Henry's destruction of the English monasteries—Thomas then preceded to Winchester College (which he preferred to his first school) before coming to New College, Oxford, where he was elected fellow on 18 January 1553, graduating Bachelor of Arts on 2 December 1556. Ordained priest in 1558 under Mary I, he subsequently fled to the continent in the early years of Elizabeth I's reign, and lifelong remained proud of the resistance which both his Wykehamist institutions had exerted against the enforced Protestant settlement in England.¹² He briefly studied in Paris, but principally he shaped his life around the cities of Douai and Leuven—with their fine universities, and Douai's aforementioned English College, a seminary to train English Catholic priests—writing assiduously and publishing

¹⁰ Anthony à Wood, *Athenæ Oxonienses: An Exact History Of All The Writers and Bishops Who have had their Education in The most ancient and famous University Of Oxford* (London: Thomas Bennet, 1691), I, 253; Marvin R. O'Connell, *Thomas Stapleton and the Counter Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 211.

¹¹ Cited in O'Connell, *Thomas Stapleton*, p. 75. This passage appears in Thomas Stapleton's Latin work *Authoritatis Ecclesiasticae circa S. Scripturarum approbationem, adeoque in vniuersum, luculenta & accurata Defensio Libri III. Digesta* (Antwerp: Jan van Keerbergen, 1592), p. 29; the original Latin reads: 'Pudet me pigetque tui, Whitakere, qui in vnica quæstione disputationis tuæ tam multa peccasti, tot mendacia effutisti, tot paralogismos fecisti, toties tibi contradixisti, tæque ipsum refutasti, tam multa absurdè, impudenter, impiè protulisti, tam ignavum aduersarium, perfidum, & ignarum te præbui. Disputare te profiteris, & disputationem instituis aduersus huius temporis Papistas, Robertum Bellarminum & me: idq; de Scriptura Sacra, de Numero librorum eius, de editione authentica, de Autoritate, de perspicuitate, de interpretatione, de perfectione eius. Aduersarios tibi delegisti non prorsus obesæ naris, & in hac Controuersiarum palæstra nó mediocriter versatos.'

¹² Recent accounts of Stapleton and his scholarship I have found most useful are: Gary W. Jenkins, 'Thomas Stapleton: Loathes Calvin, Will Travel?', in *From Rome to Zurich, between Ignatius and Vermigli: Essays in Honor of John Patrick Donnelly, SJ*, ed. Kathleen M. Comerford, Gary W. Jenkins, and W. J. Torrance Kirby (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 67–83; Jan Machielsen, 'The Lion, the Witch, and the King: Thomas Stapleton's *Apologia pro Rege Catholico Philippo II* (1592)', *English Historical Review* 129 (2014), 19–46; William J. Sheils, 'Polemic as Piety: Thomas Stapleton's *Tres Thomæ* and Catholic Controversy in the 1580s', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 60 (2009), 74–94; and Sheils's 'The Gospel, Liturgy and Controversy in the 1590s: Thomas Stapleton's *Promptuaria*', in *Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, Memory and Counter-Reformation*, ed. James E. Kelly and Susan Royal (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 189–205.

there. He received his doctorate in theology from Douai on 10 July 1571 where he was professor, and was subsequently elevated to the position of Regius Professor of Scriptures at Leuven in 1590. Though it seemed likely he would be made a cardinal following the death in 1594 of the Cardinal of England, Thomas Allen, a summons to Rome never came, and he died in Leuven on 12 October 1598, and was buried there in the city's St Peter's church.

His contemporary from Winchester and New College, John Fowler (1537–1579), foremost Catholic publisher of the 1560s and '70s, published Stapleton's works at presses in Antwerp and Leuven; however, his *Tres Thomae*, biographies in Latin of his three great namesakes, St Thomas the Apostle ('Doubting Thomas'), St Thomas Becket, and St Thomas More, was published in Douai in 1588 by Jean Bogard. Thomas More was executed just days before Stapleton's birth, and, as Stapleton writes in his preface, this association was meaningful to him, and it is very conceivable that Stapleton was named after him:

Similarity of name has made him dearer to me, and therefore after writing a life of Saint Thomas the Apostle, and of Saint Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury and martyr, it is fitting that I should add an account of Thomas More. Moreover, I first saw the light of this world in the same month and year in which More, through the gate of martyrdom, entered into eternal light.¹³

Hard on the heels last year, then, of the library's acquisition of three volumes (two 16th- and one early 17th-century) of Thomas Stapleton's works, preserved in fine contemporary pigskin bindings, this year it has been my especial pleasure to accession into New College's collections so significant a post-incunabulum as we have now acquired, one which documents our alumnus Stapleton's own usage by means of comments in his own hand.¹⁴ But, for all he had to say about Pope Joan, the page in Stapleton's copy of Sigebert of Gembloux's Chronicle that relates her tale bears, in fact, no annotations.

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¹³ Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, trans. Philip E. Hallett, ed. Katherine Stearns and Emma Curtis (CTMS Publishers at the University of Dallas, 2024), p. 4 <<https://thomasmorestudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Stapleton-Biography-04-24-2024.pdf>> (Accessed: 8 July 2025). The original Latin reads: 'vel quòd consortium nominis eum mihi chariorem reddidit, vt idcirco cū collectaneis nostris de D. Thoma Apostolo, & de D. Thoma Cantuariēsi Archiepiscopo & martyre Thomam Morum cōiungerem; vel quia eodem me mēse & anno in hanc tēporariam lucem educi & nasci cōtiguit, quo in æternam lucem, nobili martyrio perfunctus, natus est Morus', in Thomas Stapleton, *Tres Thomae seu: De S. Thomae Apostoli rebus gestis ; De S. Thoma [sic] Archiepiscopo Cantuariensi & Martyre; D. Thomae Mori Angliae quondam Cancellarij vita* (Douai: Jean Bogard, 1588), p. 5.

¹⁴ New College Library, Oxford, BT1.17.22, BT3.12.13, and BT3.38.15: see Christopher Skelton-Foord, 'Three Stapletons and Other Remarkable Acquisitions to New College Library in 2024', *New College Notes* 22 (2024), no. 8.