



Portrait of Eleonora of Toledo by Agnolo Bronzino, 1545.

Claire Litt //

The first part in this series on women's sexual and reproductive health in early modern Italy explored the political consequences of women's pregnancies, and the devastating consequences for noblewomen when they were unable to conceive. However extensively treated the topic of conception was, especially in scholarly medical literature, the topics of contraception and abortion had equal prevalence in popular medical discourse. As historians such as John Christopoulos have recently argued, the Church's ambiguous attitude towards abortion reflected the gap between its theological stance on the matter and the reality of its widespread practice.

Prior to the Counter Reformation, the Catholic Church's stance on abortion was informed by earlier Christian thinkers whose relatively moderate understanding of when a foetus gained personhood

was based on whether it moved on its own. To be animate was to have *animus* – the Latin word for soul. According to Saint Augustine, this occurred around the seventeen-week mark (Jones, 98). However other thinkers, and legal statutes, stated that the moment of ‘ensoulment’ occurred at forty days into a pregnancy for males, and as late as three months for females (Kosmin, 90). Pregnancy, and personhood, was a ‘developing reality’, not an instantaneous one (Jones, 98).

Over the second half of the sixteenth-century, a new policy by Pope Sixtus V transformed the way the Catholic church dealt with abortion – at least in theory (Christopoulos, 444). Sixtus V declared abortion to be homicide, reframing a relatively common medical practice as a mortal sin. While the rhetoric surrounding abortion became morally fraught, two high-profile cases of noblewoman who underwent abortions demonstrate that Church authorities appear to have continued to unofficially sanction the practice. These women were the Grand Duchess of Tuscany Eleonora of Toledo, and the thirteen-year-old noble “woman” Constanza Colonna.

In 1551, Pope Julius III reconvened the Council of Trent, the ecumenical council responsible for the policies of the Counter Reformation. That same year, Eleonora of Toledo, who was already mother to eight Medici princes and princesses, fell gravely ill during a pregnancy. Pope Julius III made it clear that he supported her medically-necessary abortion. In a letter from Rome, a Medici correspondent informed the Grand Duke, Cosimo I, that Pope Julius III had “great joy, thinking that this abortion had [to be] the cause of entire health, which was of the utmost desire to His Holiness [...]” [MAP Doc ID: 24132]. While Eleonora’s abortion is unusual – approved of by none other than presiding vicar of Christ on earth – it was easily justified by the threat the pregnancy caused to her own life. Constanza Colonna’s case provides an interesting contrast, revealing an instance in which the discretion of Catholic nuns came to grips against the strict new policies on abortion implemented by the Counter Reformation.

At the age of thirteen Constanza Colonna was married, in 1569, to the marchese di Caravaggio Francesco Sforza (Baernstein and Christopoulos, 41). From the very beginning Constanza disliked her new husband, and she removed herself from his household to the protection of the nuns of San Paolo Converso in Milan. Constanza appealed to her parents to have her marriage annulled on the basis that it was never consummated. This premise, however, was endangered when she demonstrated signs of pregnancy. Chalking Constanza’s ‘swelling’ up to a retention of fluids, the nuns and complicit doctors provided Constanza with medications to ‘purge’ the humoral excess in her body – and then claimed ignorance of her condition when an investigation was carried out by the archbishop (Ibid, 53). The archbishop found Constanza to be innocent despite ample evidence of her abortion. The young girl’s remorse and the tragic circumstances of her marriage caused the archbishop to take pity on her, and conveniently forget about the case entirely (Ibid, 73).

While in theory Pope Sixtus V banned abortion and, unfortunately for Constanza and the nuns of San Paolo, banished all their souls to hell, the practical implementation of this policy rested on the discretion of individual Church authorities. The nuns enabled and concealed Constanza’s abortion in order to preserve her reputation, eligibility for remarriage, and to save her from a bad relationship. Constanza represents the reality of abortion in the sixteenth century, that given

circumstances such as hers, authorities could turn a blind eye. As has historically been the case for most morally-imbued medical practices, while there was *in theory* no difference between theory and practice, *in practice* there was – and for good reason too.

Image:

Wikimedia Commons Contributors, “File:Bronzino – Eleonora di Toledo col figlio Giovanni – Google Art Project.jpg,” *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Bronzino__Eleonora_di_Toledo_col_figlio_Giovanni_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg&oldid=354663982.

Primary Sources:

Averardo Serristori wrote to Cosimo I de’Medici on May 22 1551: “[...] havendola curata i medici per opilata, ne prese somma allegrezza, pensando che detto aborto avesse a causarle intera salute, la quale era sommamente desiderata da Sua Santità [...]” BIA: The Medici Archive Project, Doc ID# 24132 (Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo del Principato 3467 , folio 244 , not numbered transcribe folio).

Secondary Sources:

Baernstein, Renée and John Christopoulos. 2014. “Interpreting the Body in Early Modern Italy: Pregnancy, Abortion and Adulthood.” *Past and Present* 223 (1) 41-75.

Christopoulos, John. “Abortion and the Confessional in Counter-Reformation Italy.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012): 443-84. doi:10.1086/667257.

Jones, David Albert. 2013. “Acquinas as an Advocate of Abortion? The Appeal to ‘Delayed Animation’ in Contemporary Christian Ethical Debates on the Human Embryo.” *Studies in Christian Ethics*. 26 (1) 97-124.

Kosmin, Jennifer F. 2018. “Midwifery Anatomized: Vesalius, Dissection, and Reproductive Authority in Early Modern Italy.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 48 (1): 79 – 104.