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Myriam Deniel-Ternant, *Ecclésiastiques en débauche (1700-1790)*. Paris: Champ Vallon, 2017.  
386 pp. Preface, figures, notes, appendices, and bibliography. €27.00 (pb). ISBN 979-1-0267-0465-2.

Review by Claire Cage, University of South Alabama.

Not archives, but ammunition was on the minds of revolutionaries storming the Bastille. But in addition to containing ammunition, gunpowder, and prisoners (only seven at the time), the Bastille housed police archives, the contents of which were strewn about in the midst of the July 14 melee. Rioters tossed documents into the moat, but many of these mud-spattered papers were retrieved. While these reconstituted archives have been of keen interest to later generations of historians, a particular series of these records piqued the curiosity of contemporary revolutionaries. In the aftermath of the storming of the Bastille, they uncovered the police dossiers on clergymen caught in flagrante delicto with Parisian prostitutes. The following year, the anonymously published *La chasteté du clergé dévoilée* printed over one hundred of these reports dating from the 1750s and 1760s. The author reported that Louis XV had tasked the police with sending these files to him and the queen for their amusement. *La chasteté du clergé dévoilée* provided fodder for those who attacked the corruption and hypocrisy of the Old Regime church and monarchy.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Parisian police reports on clerical sexual misconduct and other surviving records of the Bastille archives have been conserved in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal since the Revolution. Myriam Deniel-Ternant makes use of extensive research in the Bastille archives, including files classified as “bad priests” and “sodomy,” and other, primarily judicial, sources to analyze the sexual lives of ecclesiastics in eighteenth-century Paris. These sources include 970 police reports on clergymen caught with female prostitutes; reports from spies and informants, or *mouches*, on clerics engaging in sodomy; and judicial records on ecclesiastics imprisoned for sexual misconduct, primarily those in the Bastille prison: the *embastillés*. Why were so many priests and monks caught with prostitutes in mid-eighteenth-century Paris? It was because the police, following royal orders, placed the clients of a number of brothels under surveillance and instructed madams to summon them whenever priests or monks arrived at their brothels. The police then arrived on the scene to catch clergymen in flagrante delicto. The police interrogated the offending clerics, who generally expressed humiliation, shame, and regret, and drew up a deposition that the offending clergy signed before being released.

Evidence suggests that the lieutenant general of police then sent copies of these reports to the king as well as to the archbishop of Paris. Deniel-Ternant explores the reasons for the latter’s interest in the surveillance. Her perceptive analysis ties the mid-eighteenth-century surveillance of sexually active priests to the Jansenist controversies of the period, and she argues that the archbishop of Paris saw a morally irreproachable clergy as necessary for combatting Jansenism.

Deniel-Ternant makes clear that her work focuses almost exclusively on Paris, but the capital attracted ecclesiastics from across the country. The author analyzes the geography of clerical sexual debauchery and identifies differences in the patterns of the local origins of clergymen caught with female prostitutes

and those having sex with men. While clerical clients of female prostitutes originated from regions throughout France, clergymen reported for sodomy were mostly Parisians. Deniel-Ternant also explores sites of sexual deviance within Paris, noting that some locations seemed to specialize in clerical clientele. Reports from the undercover agents whom the police employed to discover “sodomites” were less extensive but reveal common spaces of sexual activity, notably public gardens such as the Palais Royal and Luxembourg, the Champs-Elysées, and alleyways. Deniel-Ternant posits that there was a network of ecclesiastics who shared addresses of female prostitutes and that a certain “sexual sociability” among ecclesiastics was even more pronounced among those who were involved in the Parisian homosexual subculture and who hired male prostitutes. Since evidence of sodomy is thinner than heterosexual activity, Deniel-Ternant’s analysis of sodomitical *abbés* is necessarily more limited and appropriately circumspect.

The more abundant records of ecclesiastics caught with female prostitutes offer accounts of the nature of the sexual encounters by describing states of nudity, sexual touching and intercourse, and occasionally flagellation, which also appeared in the erotic and pornographic literature of the period, notably the pornographic novel *Thérèse Philosophe* (1748) based on the famous Girard-Cadière affair.<sup>[2]</sup> The records do not include descriptions of sexual positions, and references to oral sex are largely absent. The vast majority of clergymen who sought out prostitutes donned proper clerical attire as dictated by the Tridentine reforms. Only rarely did clergymen disguise themselves as laypersons, or laypersons as clerics. The upper clergy did not appear commonly in these records and seemed to have been able to engage in illicit sex more discreetly and with greater impunity. While some members of the lower clergy visited lower-end brothels with common prostitutes or *filles publiques*, “debauched” upper clergy sought out more elite forms of prostitution and *dames entretenues*.

Clerical sexual misconduct was met with varying responses, including efforts to punish and reform the offending cleric. Frequently, the police simply released clergymen caught with prostitutes once they confessed, and Deniel-Ternant makes a case for the “permeability of the religious and juridical spheres” (p. 252) in tying police interrogations to techniques of auricular confession. Some clergymen, particularly those accused of sexual assault, faced judicial proceedings that sometimes culminated in the offending cleric being imprisoned, sent to seminary, or subjected to various punishments including the galleys, banishment, and exile. Some priests were imprisoned by *lettres de cachet*. Deniel-Ternant observes that 6,000 ecclesiastics were imprisoned secretly between 1741 and 1775, although it is unclear how many were imprisoned for reasons tied to sexual activity. Noting more severe forms of punishment, Deniel-Ternant cites three ecclesiastics who were sentenced to death for their respective sexual crimes of spiritual incest, sodomy, and “*mauvais commerce et complicité de suppression de part*” (illicit heterosexual sex and concealing a birth) (p. 220). In contrast, the sexual acts of most clerics were either undetected or tolerated by the public and went unpunished. Public toleration broke down when clergymen did not act with sufficient discretion to avoid scandal. Deniel-Ternant rightly notes the considerable ambivalence in popular attitudes toward clerical sexual activity.

In terms of structure, the book consists of three parts: “Surveillances,” “Deviances,” and “Repressions,” each containing several thematic chapters. The book includes an appendix of ecclesiastics caught in flagrante delicto with Parisian prostitutes, mostly drawn from the Bastille archives but also from *La Chasteté du clergé dévoilée*. For example, the entry on Jacque Albitte, a twenty-one- or twenty-two-year-old tonsured cleric in the diocese of Rouen and priest in Caen, concludes with a description of his sexual acts when caught with a prostitute on July 2, 1766: “*deshabillement, manualisation sans effusion de semence*” (p. 283). The author presents the appendix as a prosopography, but the prosopographical and demographic details of these clergymen will likely be of limited interest to readers compared to the more salacious and voyeuristic descriptions of the sexual acts.

*Ecclésiastiques en débauche* is a well-researched book that draws upon a rich corpus of police and judicial records. While the work does not offer an extensive treatment of cultural representations, it briefly draws some connections between literary representations and the documented sexual behaviors of clergymen.

Due to lacunae in the sources, the full extent to which ecclesiastical authorities reckoned with clerics' illicit sexual activity is unknown. Further research in diocesan visitation records and a broader geographic scope might shed additional light on the problem of clerical sexual misconduct during this period. A wider analytic scope could illuminate the even greater resonance of this problem and link it to a broader range of political, religious, and cultural contexts, particularly those surrounding debates about clerical celibacy. Deniel-Ternant briefly references an anti-celibacy tract in her introduction, while discussing the chronological framing of the book and its endpoint in 1790. She explains that this year saw the publication of *La chasteté du clergé dévoilée*, the passage of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and the submission of a parish priest's account of the harmful effects of clerical celibacy to the National Assembly. But the book does not explore debates about clerical celibacy in relation to clerical sexual misconduct or note that Revolutionaries abolished vows of celibacy and legalized the marriage of priests the following year.

Deniel-Ternant's sketch of "ecclesiastical debauchery" is, of course, constrained by distortions in the historical record, with a preponderance of material on police surveillance of prostitutes and a dearth of material on consensual sexual relations that did not involve police, a public scandal, or judicial proceedings. It is notable that extant sources seem to be silent on the sexual abuse of children by priests during this period. In contrast, the nineteenth century saw a number of ecclesiastics appearing before the courts on charges of sexual crimes against children. Although Deniel-Ternant writes about judicial sources giving voice to victims, the voices of victims of clerical sexual misconduct or abuse do not really emerge in her book.

The author situates her work within historiographic debates about the post-Tridentine clergy to offer a corrective to studies that elevate the figure of the *bon prêtre* at the exclusion of clerics who did not fulfill these ideals. A wider-ranging analysis of the relationship of sexuality to French politics, culture, and society and a nuanced gender analysis would have enabled the author to place the work in dialogue with more recent literature on religion, gender, and sexuality in eighteenth-century France. *Ecclésiastiques en débauche* also could have benefitted from the insights of Nina Kushner, whose work on the more socially elevated milieu of elite prostitution offers an incisive perspective on matters of police surveillance,<sup>[3]</sup> and its analysis of sodomy would have been enhanced by Jeffrey Merrick's important scholarship on the policing, repression, and representations of same-sex sexual behavior in eighteenth-century France.<sup>[4]</sup> Nonetheless, the book enriches our understanding of French religious history, the history of sex, and the history of policing and justice, and it will be of interest to specialists in these fields. The inherently interesting and fraught subject matter of the sexual lives of clergy makes compelling reading.

#### NOTES

[1] Dominique Darimajou, *La chasteté du clergé dévoilée ou Procès-verbaux des séances du clergé chez les filles de Paris, trouvés à la Bastille* (Paris: Les marchands de nouveautés, 1790).

[2] See Mita Choudhury, *The Wanton Jesuit and the Wayward Saint: A Tale of Sex, Religion, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

[3] Nina Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges: The World of Elite Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[4] Jeffrey Merrick, "Commissioner Foucault, Inspector Noël, and the 'Pederasts' of Paris, 1780-3," *Journal of Social History* 32 (1998): 287-307; Jeffrey Merrick, "Sodomitical Inclinations in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30 (1997): 289-95; Jeffrey Merrick, "'Nocturnal Birds' in the Champs-Elysées: Police and Pederasty in Pre-Revolutionary Paris," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8 (2002): 425-32; Jeffrey Merrick, "Sodomites and Police in Paris, 1715," *Journal of Homosexuality* 42.3 (2002): 101-26; Jeffrey Merrick, "'Brutal Passion' and 'Depraved Taste': The Case of Jacques François Pascal," in *Homosexuality in French History and Culture*, Jeffrey Merrick and Michael

Sibalis, eds. (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 85–104; Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, eds., *Homosexuality in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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