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Book Review of the “Commentaries” of Pope Pius II (1458–1464) and the Crisis of the Fifteenth-Century Papacy

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The "Commentaries" of Pope Pius II (1458–1464) and the Crisis of the Fifteenth-Century Papacy. Emily O'Brien.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. xiv + 336 pp. \$65.

In this book Emily O'Brien argues that Pope Pius II's *Commentaries* aimed to defend papal secular and religious authority in the face of hostile princes and conciliarists. The *Commentaries* also served as a personal apology for the actions of Aeneas Piccolomini,

who spent his ecclesiastical, political, and literary career in the 1430s and 1440s working on behalf of the Council of Basel and the emperor Frederick III, two of the major threats to papal power during the mid-fifteenth century. O'Brien offers a welcome and interesting contextualized reading of Pius's large *Commentaries*, and this is a monograph that all historians of the fifteenth-century papacy and humanism should consult.

The argument is presented across two basic sections. The first half of the book lays out the conciliarist and secular threats faced by the fifteenth-century papacy, as well as Aeneas Piccolomini's role in contributing to those threats. Chapter 1 lays out these threats to papal power, both to the pope's claim to be ruler of Christendom and to be prince in the papal state. Chapter 2 looks at Piccolomini's problematic treatment of conciliarism in treatises as late as the 1450s. Chapter 3 shows the pope as attacked on all sides by secular threats ranging from Piccolomini's own words discrediting the power of the pope as prince, through the Neapolitan and Milanese machinations underlying his election as pope, to the apathetic response of Europe's princes to Pius's call for a Crusade. The book's second section turns to the *Commentaries* themselves and how Pope Pius II sought to use his text to combat these perceived threats. Chapter 4 argues that the *Commentaries* reject conciliarism, and it in fact entirely delegitimizes that argument by selective historical treatment and bold removals of key controversial developments. Chapter 5 presents Pius's arguments that the pope was an essential, legitimate leader of the princes of Europe. The final chapter situates Pius's presentation of himself as a secular ruler within the context of classical writings by Caesar and Virgil, in addition to historiographical writings by Pius's contemporaries.

The book's approach fits into an increasing body of scholarship that views humanist historiography "as a fundamentally political act" (15). Gone are questions that judged these humanist histories by their adherence to or divergence from much later standards of "objective" history writing. In its place is a deeply contextualized study of the life, goals, and possible choices available to first Aeneas Piccolomini and then Pope Pius II. This is a book that fits well alongside the works of Gary Ianziti, Margaret Meserve, Riccardo Fubini, and other scholars who have sought to better understand the political arguments that underlay humanist histories.

This book offers much for readers to ponder. O'Brien demonstrates the continuing threat to the papacy posed by conciliarist supporters well after the dissolution of the Council of Basel, as well as increasingly powerful secular rulers who were leaving behind the idea of a strong papacy with sway and jurisdiction over the whole of Christendom. Through a close comparison of Aeneas's pre-papacy writings with his *Commentaries*, O'Brien shows how the humanist actively sought to construct his apology and craft his legacy. In this analysis and in other parts of the book the argument is based on topics and events that Pius chose not to include in his *Commentaries*. Arguments from silence are always difficult to prove; yet, the quantity of evidence that O'Brien presents coupled with her comparison of narratives across several different texts make her readings plausible. Pope Pius's vitriol against all things French receives passing mention in the book, and

might have been brought out and focused upon more. However, it is probable that a more in-depth treatment would only reinforce O'Brien's central claims. In short, O'Brien's book is a fascinating example of humanist history studied through the lens of politics. It is sure to stand at the center of future conversations about Pope Pius II's *Commentaries* for years to come.

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