

The fabrication of the Middle Ages: Roides's *Pope Joan*

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Pope Joan, Emmanuel Roides's "youthful sin", published in 1866, is probably one of the best known works of Greek prose outside Greece.¹ It provoked immediate and strong reactions both within Greece and without.² Its irreverent portrayal of the Middle Ages and its surprising juxtapositions of medieval and contemporary events, people and issues, are some of its most salient characteristics. The work continues to attract and amuse readers in every language.

Set in the western Middle Ages of the ninth century, a period and a place scarcely known to the Greek reading public, *Pope Joan* tells the story of a woman who became pope, a story whose veracity some think Roides actually believed in.³ Roides's erudition is impressive and only the most well-educated medievalist, with an impeccable knowledge of the historiography of the Middle Ages, has the tools to analyse and pass judgment on Roides's historical research. This area of *Pope Joan* has been left untouched, while other, literary, aspects of the

¹ There are two English translations, one from the nineteenth century: J.H. Freese, *Pope Joan: An historical romance* (London 1900), and Lawrence Durrell, *Pope Joan* (London 1954, 1960, 1981). For Charles H. Collette's partial translation, see note 7 below. For translations of *Pope Joan* into other languages see Alain Boureau, *La papesse Jeanne* (Paris 1988), pp. 312-14. I thank Peter Mackridge for calling my attention to this work.

² A selection of reviews of the book is printed by Alkis Angelou, *H Πόμισσα Ιωάννα* (Athens 1993), pp. 365-410; see also pp. 42-4 for Roides's own reference to his critics and for the Church's reaction. For the French reaction see Boureau, *La papesse Jeanne*, p. 313.

³ See Charles H. Collette, *Pope Joan: A historical study* (London 1886), pp. 6-7; L. Durrell, *Pope Joan*, p. 10; Rosemary and Darroll Pardoe, *The Female Pope* (Wellingborough 1988), p. 74 and pp. 76-82 for those who still believe in the truth of her existence.

work have been discussed.⁴ *Pope Joan* is a very funny book but it is also the product of a very erudite man.⁵

Pope Joan is a work which is not easily categorised. It is often defined by its opposition to certain literary forms and to institutions: an "anti-historical novel", an "anti-romance", "anti-church"; yet no one category is inclusive of all its qualities. Roides himself provided a number of descriptions of the work; the title page presents it as a "medieval study", the preface declares it "a narrative encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages", and the main body of the work refers to it as a "narrative", a "true history".⁶ These categorisations seem to indicate a work of historical research rather than literary fiction at a time when the Greek reading public sought out historical novels, both foreign and Greek, as never before. Yet both Greek and imported novels of this kind were promoting historical accuracy and documentation.⁷ In his preface Roides prepared his readers for his historical reconstruction of the Middle Ages, asserting that:

Every phrase in *Pope Joan*, almost every word, is based on the witness of a contemporary writer. The monks' anecdotes were taken from the chronicles of monasteries of that time, the miracles from medieval synaxaries, [...] strange theological beliefs from the writings of contemporary theologians. [...] Every description of a city, a building, clothes, food... is accurate even in its smallest detail, as can be seen in part from the notes at the end of the work which I could have easily multiplied. (70-71)

⁴ See, especially, Dimitris Tziouvas, "Η Πάπισσα Ιωάννα και ο ρόλος του αναγνώστη", *Χάρτης* 15 (July 1985) 427-42 (reprinted in his *Μετά την αισθητική* (Athens 1987), pp. 259-82), and Maria Kakavoulia, "Πάπισσα Ιωάννα: πολύτοπο/παλίμψηστο", *Χάρτης* 15 (April 1985) 294-312.

⁵ A longer study, by the present writer, of Roides's historiographical method and his portrayal of Byzantium in particular is to appear in: P. Magdaleno and D. Ricks (eds.), *Byzantium and the Modern Greek identity*.

⁶ All references to *Pope Joan* are from the edition by A. Angelou, as in note 2 above. All translations are my own.

⁷ On the reception of the historical novel in Greece and for Greek historical novels see Sophia Denisi, *Το ελληνικό ιστορικό μυθιστόρημα και ο Sir Walter Scott (1830-1880)* (Athens 1994).

He provides a scholarly apparatus, with notes at the end of the work, notes at the bottom of the page, and a very detailed introduction which presents the medieval sources for a female pope's existence and the later scholarly commentary on the sources' reliability.⁸ The historian's task and Roides's are one and the same, for they attempt to answer the same question:

But, from the sixth to the eleventh century, from the last Roman emperor to the first knight, who lived on our planet? What did they do, what did they eat, what did they believe, and what did they wear? This question only the historian by profession can answer, who undertakes the unenviable task of leafing through the boundless collections of medieval manuscripts. [...] So I, too, extracted from each of those tomes condemned to eternal oblivion, passages describing customs of past times, queer beliefs, popular superstitions, relics of idolatry, and anything else I found which had escaped the attention of more recent historians... (69-70)

If Roides's disclosure of his research tools and methods is not enough to show the reader that *Pope Joan* is a work of history, and not literature, a written work based on others' written works and not an imaginative recreation, he makes the point in other ways, in the main body of the book, contrasting the medieval world recreated in novels with that of historiography:

⁸ Greek editions of *Pope Joan* and translations of the work more often than not produce a partial edition of the work, leaving out one of the above, usually the introduction and the notes at the end; for example, those published by Εκδόσεις Γαλαξία (Athens 1960, 1983) and Εκδόσεις Σ. Δαρέμα (Athens, no date). The translations into English offer greater variations: Charles H. Collette, *Pope Joan: A historical study* (London 1886) is a translation of Roides's introduction only, without the text of the novel; J.H. Freese, *Pope Joan: An historical romance* (London 1900) translates Roides's preface, the novel and the notes at the back, but not the introduction; Lawrence Durrell, *Pope Joan* (London 1954, 1960, 1981) translates his adaptation of the novel and supplies his own notes at the back but does not give Roides's preface, introduction or notes. These incomplete and selective editions are misleading, given the integral significance of the introduction and notes to Roides's work, as Kakavoulia, op. cit., has demonstrated.

Has it ever happened to you, dear reader, that when you had passed a day reading a novel about the Middle Ages, such as the *Deeds of King Arthur*, or the *Loves of Lancelot and Guinevere*, that you let the book fall as you began in your mind to compare the past age with the present, longing once more for those times when reverence, patriotism and love still ruled the world? When faithful hearts burned under steel breast-plates, when pious lips kissed the feet of the Crucified; when queens wove tunics for their husbands and virgins waited for years in the rooms of their castles for the return of their suitors; when the illustrious Roland withdrew to a cave opposite the nunnery where his beloved was shut up and spent thirty years looking at the light in her window [...]?

Frequently among such reveries I felt my blood warm and my eyes grow moist with emotion. But when I left the minstrels I sought the truth under the dust of the centuries, in the chronicles of contemporaries, in the laws of kings, the "proceedings" of synods and the rulings of popes, when instead of Hersart I unfurled Baronius and Muratori and saw naked before me the Middle Age, I lamented then not that those golden days had passed, but that they had never dawned in the universe of faith and heroism. This book contains only outrages or caricatures but these are the true, photographic, so to speak, images of people of that time. What I say, I support by invincible witnesses, like the kings their laws by the lance. (134-5)⁹

Roides, then, presents *Pope Joan* as a work of serious historical writing and, if his readers do not like what they see, it is because they have been served up a false picture by writers of novels. If we take Roides at his word, he offers a recreation of Joan's ninth-century world, drawn from all the available sources. His readers are not to be allowed the luxury of losing themselves in a golden world of "reverence, patriotism, and love". But they are not even allowed to lose themselves in the much less golden world he is offering them. He yanks them out of the ninth-century past and into the procedures of reading and writing, reminding them how and when the book before them was produced.

Roides involves the reader in the production of the book in several ways. One is the constant reference to sources by means of

⁹ Durrell's translation (p. 39) excludes the last two sentences of this paragraph. See note 7.

the notes. He sends the reader from the text to a footnote which sometimes refers to a note at the back or to the introduction. One text leads to another, breaking up the continuity of the narrative and the unity of the work. In this way the reader is constantly reminded of the textual basis of the book, of the procedure involved in producing it.¹⁰

The narrator draws the reader into his own work and experience as a reader by direct reference to the research he did or did not do. In discussing Joan's parentage, with which all good biographies begin, the narrator informs us:

If I were to spend some years comparing manuscripts, I might be able to learn whether Joan's father was called Willibald or Wallafrid but I doubt whether the public would repay me for this effort. (115)

Instead of scholarship we are offered a parody of scholarship. Instead of a smooth narrative we are presented with a problem. We are reminded that the heroine and her story have their origin in books in a library when the narrator describes the sixteen-year-old Joan, as she sees her reflection in a river: "This is the way Joan saw herself in the water, this is the picture I also saw in a manuscript in Cologne" (125).

The narrator calls attention to himself as a reader but also as a writer: "The iron pen with which I am writing this true history is of English make, from the factories of Smith..." (138). "The great poets, Homer and Mr. P. Soutsos write beautiful verses in their sleep but I always wipe my pen before I put my nightcap on my head" (214). References to the time of writing, sudden and surprising insertions into the text of contemporary people, events, or issues, likewise prevent readers from abandoning themselves to the ninth-century reality which the author has promised them. "Alcuin was English; England then had the monopoly on theologians as today (it has) on steam engines" (119). The insertions surprise the reader, creating amusing parallels and comparisons. Joan's travels with monks occasion the following observation: "Today inns are set up for the

¹⁰ For a stimulating and ground-breaking analysis of intertextuality in *Pope Joan*, see Kakavoulia, *op. cit.*

sake of travellers; in the Middle Ages many monks became travellers for the sake of the inns" (135). After a digression in which the narrator recommends the Catholic Church to any Turk or fire-worshipper who might wish to convert to Christianity, he says, "Let us return to the text and let the error of my digressions be attributed to the 27 newspapers of Athens and the four bells of the Russian church which interrupt at every minute the thread of my narrative" (143). When Joan is in Athens bishop Niketas questions her

on the dogma which had been adopted among the learned of the West concerning the Eucharist, that is, if they believe that the bread and wine were actually changed into the body and blood of the Saviour, or whether they consider them symbol and image of the Divine Body. This question occupied minds at that time, like the Eastern Question today. (197)

The frequent allusion to contemporary preoccupations, to the names and problems of Roides's day, and to the processes involved in the making of *Pope Joan*, tie the reader to the written page, to the text as text. That text is presented by the author as an unadulterated medieval world, a photographic image, based on historically documented, and therefore "real", people, places, events and details of everyday life. But let us look more carefully. What can we learn about the Middle Ages from Roides?

The author, in his introduction, insists on the authenticity of his narrative – "almost every word is based on the witness of a medieval writer" – yet when we arrive at Part 4, the last part of the narrative concerning Joan's election as pope and death as she gave birth in procession in Rome, the narrator states, "Instead of taking the material for my narrative, as before, from my head, I am obliged to draw it (now) from august chroniclers" (215). This information contradicts the assertions made throughout the book up to this point and therefore leads to confusion and uncertainty about the previous pages.

To confusion by contradiction is added misinformation. Roides makes his scholarly apparatus prominent, drawing attention to its workings and its failings. He attaches footnotes to statements where an explanation in the text would have sufficed and omits to give a footnote where it is needed. But in

both cases, the information in the text is false. Thus, the word *στραβουλάριος* is given a footnote, with the explanation that it means "inn-keeper" (137 n.1),¹¹ while in another passage, Roides makes a passing reference to a "trustworthy hagiographer" but gives no bibliographical reference: Frumentius's ass

started to run, emitting as a kind of protest, such resonant brayings that (according to a trustworthy hagiographer) many of the sleeping virgins, thinking that the trump of Judgment had sounded, extruded their bald heads from the tombs. (152)

This passage contains most of the hallmarks of Roides's style: his irreverence to Christian dogma, to historical documentation and the sharp shock at the end: "sleeping virgins" turn out to be long dead and, therefore, necessarily "bald".

Roides draws on a variety of medieval sources which belong to different genres of writing; saints' lives, chronicles, *erotapokriseis*, *synaxaria*. He takes motifs or information from these and elaborates on them, creating something new in the process. To take the example of hagiography: in this tradition, the future saint is often a much-prayed-for child. In Roides's version, Joan's mother, Jutta, lit a candle each day before the icon of St Paternus, that she might have a child. Her prayers are answered. A miracle occurs for, although her husband has been castrated, she becomes pregnant with Joan when two archers of the Count of Erfurt rape her, "reminding her by force of the true destiny of woman on earth" (120-1). Thus, the *topos* is distorted, an illegitimate saint is born and, in addition, a new saint is invented by the play on the word *pater*.

In hagiography, the saint shows early signs of his or her bright future. So too Joan, who as an infant "never wished to suckle on a Wednesday or a Friday but whenever the breast was offered to her on a fast day, she turned away her eyes in horror" (121). The note at the back gives the information that "St Stephen and St Rocco did not feed at the breast on days of fast.

¹¹ Roides has made up this designation for an "inn-keeper" from a real title, *taboullarios*, "notary", but has added the "s" to make the word sound like the name of a keeper of stables and the "r", which gives the technical and official-sounding title a prefix *στραβός* = "crooked", "blind".

The latter even bit the breast when it was offered to him on a fast day. See the *Martyrologium* of Maurolykos at 28 November and 16 August" (255). Roides's note leads his readers down the wrong track. Early signs of asceticism are not uncommon in saints' lives and indeed St Stephen the Young (+765) and St Rock (fourteenth century) are celebrated on the days indicated by Roides. But neither saint appears to have been celebrated for refusing the breast, nor is there a *Martyrologium* of Maurolykos or "Blackwolf". This is probably a composite name, taken from the names of two ninth-century churchmen who did compile *martyrologia*: Rabanus Maurus, archbishop of Mainz, and Wolfhard, monk in Franconia.¹² Yet, Joan's abstinence as an infant is an element found in some saints' lives not cited by Roides: a ninth-century Latin Life of St Nicholas by John the Deacon records that "he took the breast only once on Wednesdays and Fridays".¹³ Thus, we are offered a mixture of the documented and the made-up, the true and the false. But which is which?

To shun the company and games of other children is another quality which marks the future saint early in life. Joan had "holy relics, crucifixes and prayer beads as her first playthings" (121). Roides's variation on the theme mocks the convention. By his use of *αθύρματα* for "toys", a word which implies the frivolous and changeable and is used of fate, love, and the gods, he adds to the ridiculous nature of his innovation.

Thus, what appears at first sight to be an impressive and serious show of scholarship contributes not to the reader's knowledge of the Middle Ages but to confusions, surprises and misinformation. The reader no longer knows anything for certain. What seems certain because it has a textual basis can no longer be assumed to be true. What seems false because it is undocumented could very well be true.

Roides sets up confusions in categories. Just as he mixes "true" and "false" material, so too he mixes heterogeneous things in the same sentence, referring to writers of fiction along with writers of history, fictional characters and historical personages:

¹² J. Dubois, *Les Martyrologues du Moyen Age latin* (Brepols 1978), pp. 56-8.

¹³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, transl. W. E. Ryan, Vol. I (Princeton 1993), p. 21.

Much better known are the later Middle Ages, when iron-clad heroes and white-robed heroines appear, the Tristans, the Lionhearts, the Templars [...] from the books of Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, from museum collections and the arias of Rossini. (69)

The boundaries between history and legend, fact and fiction, are not clearly delineated. Both history and legend depend on texts which depend on other texts. Roides says this implicitly and explicitly. The notes at the back which comment on the scene of Father Ralegus's christening of the geese as fish (137) show that Roides's source could be historical or fictional:

Dumas described a similar scene in his novel *Queen Margot*. He took it from the *Chronicle of Charles* of Mérimée who copied it from the aforementioned *synaxarion* of St Odo, where it is found almost word for word. (261)

Just as *Pope Joan* is a pastiche of sources, so too are its aims numerous and varied. Roides rejects the literary conventions of his time – the historical novel, with its heavy emphasis on detailed documentation. He likewise attacks the conventions of the romantic novel. When describing the sea journey of Joan and Frumentius to Athens, his reverie on the beauty of nature is quickly reduced to the banal:

Nothing can be sweeter in such weather than to find oneself lying on the deck of a swiftly travelling ship, passing the time between breakfast and dinner with your head supported on your beloved's knees; sharing her admiration of the beauty of earth, sky and water. The stomach and the heart must be at ease so that we can admire nature. Otherwise the sun looks to us – to me at any rate – like a machine for ripening melons, the moon a lantern for thieves, the trees merely so much firewood, the sea mere brine, and life about as insipid as a boiled pumpkin. (187)

An example of Romanticism which falls deflated, not to the earth, but onto the printed page, is the following: "After a great deal of conversation, interrupted by kisses as authors use commas and full stops, they fell asleep on the Pentelic marble..." (199-200).

Roides handles most of the literary conventions of his day with irreverence: romantic poetry – frequent comical references to "Mr. P. Soutsos"¹⁴; the historical novel – he plays havoc with documentation and recreation of the past. But most of all it is the Church which he strikes at with his female pope.

Pope Joan has traditionally been received as an anti-Church work. Certainly this is how the Church received it, excommunicating Roides.¹⁵ In his preface to the work, he makes direct and constant references to the way in which he presented the Church:

Many may accuse me of a more serious sin, the daring with which I present the ecclesiastical muck of the Middle Ages, in the West and in Byzantium, sometimes in asides on the present state of our Church. The unbiased reader will see that there is not a trace of the polemical in this. (73)

His criticism is of the "medieval" nature of the Eastern Church:

We considered it good to remain attached to the conventions of the Middle Ages, like oysters to a rock. Our liturgy lasts two hours, like that in the time of St Basil, and has no listeners. Our priests are chosen from the "scum of the earth", as in the time of the Apostle Paul, and no one listens to their counsels. Our fasts are fitting for tonsured monks and no one fasts, our icons are monstrous and no one kisses them; as for our ecclesiastical nasal voicings, I judge it superfluous to say anything. [...] Whoever enters one of our churches is overwhelmed by one feeling only, the desire to leave. (74-5)

More than once elsewhere in *Pope Joan* Roides refers to the state of the Eastern Church which, unlike the Roman Church has not understood the need to change its image in order to attract people:

¹⁴ For Roides's position with regard to Romanticism and P. Soutsos in particular, see Athena Georganta, *Εμμανουήλ Ροΐδης: Η πορεία προς την Πάπισσα Ιωάννα (1860-1865)* (Athens 1993), pp. 223-7.

¹⁵ For the Church's reaction, see Angelou, *Η Πάπισσα Ιωάννα*, pp. 43-6.

Religions resemble women. Both, as long as they are young, need neither smartening up nor rouge to be surrounded by worshippers ready to sacrifice even their lives for them, like the first Christians and Aspasia's lovers. But when they get old, they need to resort to rouge and ornaments. The Roman Church understood this; when it saw the zeal of the faithful turning cold, it resorted to painters and sculptors, [...] while the Eastern Church, either out of poverty or pride, although the elder sister, has insisted on wanting to draw the faithful by nasal songs and scowling icons. (159)

For Roides, the Church should move with the times. This means not only adopting cosmetic changes but also becoming a separate institution, divorced from the affairs of the state. He attacked the role of religion as a uniting force of Hellenism. In his preface, he described the attitude of many people who were against change in the Church, "because of the gratitude we feel for the Church which freed us from the foreign yoke and through which we hope sooner or later for the *Megali Idea* to be carried out – that is, for the freeing of Epiros and Thessaly" (75). Here he belittles the Church's role in the Great Idea, with its narrow definition, confining it to the freeing of Epiros and Thessaly.¹⁶

Roides's reply to the Encyclical of Excommunication issued by the Holy Synod exhibits the same outrageous fabrication which is at work in his *Pope Joan*. In this, Roides reminded the bishops of their unlawful conduct and their repeated anti-Christian actions:

It is not your part, my esteemed prelates, to denounce others as upsetters of the established order, when you have for three years been overturning and trampling on the holy canons and the laws of the state, seeking to transfer bishops from one See to another. It is even less fitting for you to denounce others as impious while [...] you honour the saints so little that you change their names in accordance with the political circumstances, making them sometimes adherents of Otto, at other times of the Rebels.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Georganta, op. cit., pp. 211, 249-50.

¹⁷ For the text of Roides's reply, see Angelou, op. cit., pp. 295-316; the passage quoted above is from pp. 314-15.

In a footnote to this statement, Roides gives details of the incident which involved the change in the saint's name:

When the young Dosios shot at Queen Amalia, there was set up in the church of the Metropolis an icon of St Sozon, who saved from the assassin's bullet "his pure, chaste, immaculate queen", as the Holy Metropolitan called Amalia at that time. After a while, however, when the October change in government came, the name of St Sozon was changed to St Eleutherios, in memory of the revolution "which cleansed the earth of the Fatherland from the tyrants". See the article in *Αυγή* which was written about this at that time.¹⁸

Roides uses here his well-attested method of providing a footnote to back up his text. Yet, there is no article in the newspaper *Αυγή* to this effect and his reference must be purposely vague. It seems, instead, that in 1863 the small Byzantine Church of the Saviour, του Σωτήρος, which was next to the Metropolis, had its name changed to Άγιος Ελευθέριος. Roides, once again, gives documentation which turns out not to exist in the form in which he reports it. He plays with the evidence as he does on the names "Sozon" (Σώζων) and "Soter" (Σωτήρ).¹⁹

Nothing is sacred for Roides. He presents us with a confusion of values and categories. True stories turn out to be false and false stories true. He blurs the once clear distinction between historical truth and created truth, between legend and fact, implying with his cross-references, footnotes and scholia that *Pope Joan* is as fabricated or as authentic as pope Joan. As Roides said at the end of his preface, it is up to us to believe what we wish.²⁰

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¹⁸ Angelou, *ibid.*, pp. 314-15, note 1; Georganta, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-316.

¹⁹ See the very careful analysis of this passage by Georganta, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-6.

²⁰ Angelou, p. 113: Ἦδη δε αφίνω έκαστον ό,τι βούλεται να πιστεύση.