Abstract:

This paper sets out to examine and analyze the different elements that influenced illicit clerical relationships of the high Middle Ages within the borders of modern France. While most studies of clerical celibacy have focused on the Church's decision to adopt such a policy, this paper instead explores the other side of the conflict – those priests, monks, and nuns who failed to maintain their chastity and entered into loving, sexual, or even familial bonds despite their vows of celibacy. As such, the paper is driven largely through case studies of individual or sometimes collections of primary documents. This sequence begins with an analysis of the letters sent from Cambrai and Noyon in the late eleventh century, in which I argue that in the early days of the Gregorian reforms, anti-reformers adopted similar rhetorical styles as the reformers themselves to excuse and rationalize their now forbidden relationships. I then discuss the life of Robert of Arbrissel to examine the changing relationship between sanctity and celibacy after the reforms were put in place. From there I move on to discuss the letters of Abelard and Heloise to demonstrate the two opposing responses to clerical celibacy – submission or opposition, before analyzing fourteenth-century inquisitorial documents to interpret the possible roles taken by belief, love, and secrecy in certain clerical affairs. My last case study looks at the visitations made by Archbishop Eudes Rigaud in the thirteenth century, which I use to demonstrate the diversity of behaviors, players, and power structures found in relationships involving the medieval clergy. I conclude that there was no one way to engage in clerical relationships in the high Middle Ages, but that a combination of many elements including love, sexual desire, power, secrecy, logic, and the character of the people themselves resulted in a plethora of different and nuanced clerical relationships.