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Review of *Witchcraft, Superstition, and Observant Franciscan Preachers: Pastoral Approach and Intellectual Debate in Renaissance Milan* by Fabrizio Conti

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*Witchcraft, Superstition, and Observant Franciscan Preachers: Pastoral Approach and Intellectual Debate in Renaissance Milan.* Fabrizio Conti.

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Fabrizio Conti's study examines how a group of Milanese friars staked out a skeptical position in debates on witchcraft at the end of the fifteenth century. While his focus is narrow—most of his argument is based on a contextualized analysis of one sermon by Bernardo Busti—he nonetheless provides a compelling case for how pastoral experiences influenced theological discussions. Scholars of magic and witchcraft beliefs are an obvious and appreciative audience for this work, but this topic also engages two areas of

particular interest among intellectual and religious historians. First, Conti contributes to new attention on the later Observant reform movement and the friars' roles in late fifteenth-century society. He stresses, though, that this is not a book about preaching or ultimately about the friars' relationship with the laity. Rather, his main concern is a *mentalité* oriented toward magic and superstition (xiii). Conti successfully argues that these friars' reservations over the reality of witchcraft beliefs demonstrate that subject's importance for their intellectual formation as preachers, and also suggest new and earlier evidence for the Renaissance Church's efforts to distinguish licit and illicit beliefs as part of a pastoral approach to reform. His case study thus offers a challenge to the perpetual historiographical debate over a shift from medieval to modern perspectives.

The book is divided into three parts (each consisting of three chapters). The first introduces the friars of St. Angelo, which was founded in 1421. The house soon became not only the leading Observant friary in its province, but also the center for the production of preaching and sermon literature in Milan. Conti focuses on the community between 1480 and 1510 when Bernardo Busti became the most influential figure there, producing encyclopedic collections of sermon literature. Conti characterizes these works (Busti's and his confreres') as both exhaustive yet concise, synthesizing the latest theological thinking even as they offered practical models for other preachers. Their utility contributed to the success of these works in print. The book's second part turns to the treatment of superstition in these model collections. Conti provides detailed comparisons with various classifying schemes for sins, but uses Busti's sermon 16 from his *Rosarium Metricum*, a collection of Lenten sermons, as the centerpiece for showing the variety of ways Milanese friars understood superstition. This particular sermon addresses transgressions of the first commandment, where Busti considered credence in dreams, magical incantations, and other popular superstitions as forms of idolatry (that is, crediting to other entities what is due only to God). Conti's reading of the sermon in comparison with other contemporary works and its authorities is comprehensive and allows him to sketch out the spectrum of ideas related to witchcraft beliefs among the Milanese friars. His comparison with Dominican patterns of thought offers a broader perspective (166–72). His level of detail can be distracting, though, as the text sometimes overdescribes or digresses into extensive reviews of previous scholarship (reflecting the work's origin as a doctoral dissertation).

The third part of the book represents Conti's most original contribution as he considers how Busti and other Franciscan authors distinguished superstition from witchcraft. Busti's analysis brought together what were originally independent traditions: popular belief (originating in Northern Europe) in the night rides of Diana and her followers and claims about flying witches derived from Inquisition trials. Unlike their fellow Dominican and Franciscan friars who served as Inquisitors, however, the Milanese friars saw these beliefs not as facts but rather diabolical fabrications designed to lead the believer into idolatry. Conti concludes that the St. Angelo friars were interested in challenging an emerging mythology of witchcraft. His final chapter, a consideration of a polemical exchange between Samuele Cassini, another Milanese Franciscan, and the

Dominican Vincenzo Dodo, suggests how an Aristotelian-Thomistic rationalism also shaped their doubts concerning the reality of witchcraft. This fascinating distinction suggests an avenue for further research about the development of skepticism derived from both intellectual and occupational formations. Conti's research makes clear the rewards of studying pastoral materials as a part of the history of witchcraft and superstition.

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