

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Meserve, Margaret. Papal Bull: Print, Politics, and Propaganda in Renaissance Rome

Barry Torch

Volume 45, numéro 3, été 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099764ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40467>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Torch, B. (2022). Compte rendu de [Meserve, Margaret. Papal Bull: Print, Politics, and Propaganda in Renaissance Rome]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(3), 350–352. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40467>



Meserve, Margaret.

Papal Bull: Print, Politics, and Propaganda in Renaissance Rome.

Singleton Center Books in Premodern Europe. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021. Pp. xii, 437 + 89 b/w ill. ISBN 978-1-421-44044-6 (hardcover) US\$59.95.

Any review of Margaret Meserve's book will be published, printed, circulated, and finally (hopefully) read by a receptive audience. Just like the materials studied in Meserve's *Papal Bull: Print, Politics, and Propaganda in Renaissance Rome*, a review is a tool, one that advertises both its subject and its contribution to a wider world. However, unlike academic reviews, papal bulls had real power in early modern culture. Meserve's book is a remarkable example of how to study the papacy's preferred media of the bull, especially through the lenses of book history and political communication. She revises the study of early modern print culture and the early modern papacy, demonstrating how to think about documents with an eye to their circulation.

Papal Bull argues that in the decades prior to the Lutheran Reformation, the papacy deliberately exploited the new technology of print. Meserve suggests, counter to much historiography, that the popes effectively used the new printing presses to reinforce ancient and medieval narratives of power in the worlds of early modern politics and religion. This was no easy feat. Rather than expecting *literati* to argue amongst themselves for the papacy's importance, the curia and its allies across Europe used the new technology to replicate, reinforce, re-create, and occasionally outright create new texts to bolster their perceived ancient authority. The papacy did this primarily through the bull, a public decree or law issued by the pope, and "Rome's most formal but also most common medium of political communication" (9). Pairing many papal bulls with other sources, Meserve shows how the popes "used print to cement their own grip on power, to stifle dissent, and to prosecute their foes" (15).

The book proceeds largely chronologically, from the advent of print in Rome in 1467 to the publication of Luther's excommunication bull in 1520. The first half of the book addresses the political contexts of the papacy's use of print, while the second reveals how popes used print to define and shape their authority. The first chapter grounds print in its cultural context. Meserve describes what political communication was like in pre-print Rome, how bulls were circulated, who had authority in what spaces, and how the public responded to

this performance of political communication by showing how laws were distributed on doors and walls, and through proclamations. She then narrates the story of the printers and authors who integrated print into their worlds, and how the popes joined them. She uses two case studies—the Ottoman conquest of Negroponte, and the accusation of blood libel against the Italian Jews for the murder of Simon of Trent—to show how the papacy used print to respond to political events. In this story, the papacy of Sixtus IV becomes extremely important both locally and internationally: his many wars across Italy, literal and enacted in print, are the subject of one chapter, while another chapter focuses on conciliar and theological conflicts across the Alps. Moving locally and internationally, Meserve reveals that by the mid-1470s, the papacy became a canny user of print, using printed communication as a weapon in its conflicts across Europe.

Meserve is not solely concerned with affairs of state. She addresses how the papacy used print to shape its religious affairs, examining the printed works surrounding refugee relics that the papacy promoted (the Veil of Veronica from the late twelfth century, and the Holy House of Loreto from the fifteenth century, among others). She shows how printers created more and better pamphlets to appeal to an international market of pilgrims, adding images that gave credibility to these relics. The output of relic pamphlets reveals increasing papal support for the circulation and production of these texts and relics. She then turns to the packaging and publication of obedience orations to the pope by ambassadors of rulers across Europe, stressing how this “ancient form” of subservience to the papacy was both recent and deeply affected by the introduction of print. In the political economy of early modern Europe, the circulation of these orations re-entrenched papal authority over rulers. These publications, though seemingly mere vanities, had great currency in political culture.

Meserve also investigates the printing culture surrounding the “thunderbolt bulls” (288) of Pope Julius II, arguing that his additions of images to the bulls enhanced their authority. She stresses the importance of these rapid-fire bulls and their effects by examining how proclamations from the Fifth Lateran Council reflected and used the changes in the bulls’ format. The book concludes by looking at what is arguably the most famous Renaissance papal bull, *Exsurge Domini* (1520) condemning Martin Luther, revealing this bull as a capstone of all the development that she has narrated. Meserve then reflects on the *longue*

durée of papal political communication through the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

Meserve's book commands a wide range of sources. While the book focuses on the medium of papal bulls, her sources go beyond them: woodcuts, statutes, and printed images join the *bullae* and the more traditional print genres of elite Latin books. Her command of sources leads her analysis beyond the simple narrative of re-entrenching monarchical authority, to how and why the papacy invested in print at all. She addresses political culture and atmosphere in a wide world, examining authors both pro- and anti-papal. Her work is a fine example of political and cultural history, with a clear display of how the study of bibliography fits into the world of early modern politics. While this reviewer would have liked to see more of the processual minutiae—how many of these texts were printed and shared, and more on their reception—Meserve addresses and answers her questions of how and why the papacy engaged in printed political communication before Luther. *Papal Bull* is an important, lively, and beautifully written study on how the papacy engaged in the worlds of premodernity using print, far earlier than many assume.

BARRY TORCH

York University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40467>